The environmental movement in the face of the failure of the Paris climate summit

The outcome of the UN Climate Conference of Nov.-Dec. 2015 in Paris has been hailed as encouraging progress, or even a landmark agreement. Even many demonstrators and critics of the summit generally regarded that it was positive in many ways. Yet the reality is that the Paris summit was a major flop. This summit put on a positive spin to the actions of the bourgeoisie and the governments, but it failed to make any progress on global warming. It made a lot of promises, but it stuck to all of the failed methods of the past. (See page 4)

Support the Syrian people against the Assad dictatorship

It has been claimed that the democratic forces opposed to the Baath party dictatorship in Syria have been reduced to insignificance. Obama, the man with ties to Wall Street, famously denigrated them as ineffective because they were just “former farmers or teachers or pharmacists”, while Russia is trying to bomb them out of existence. Russia’s stepped-up intervention was prompted by fear of an imminent fall of the Assad government. Russia’s massive bombing and thousands of Iranian soldiers have inflicted terrible setbacks on the Syrian resistance, while other outside powers shrug as they never cared about the democratic forces either. Meanwhile the international talks are a place where the outside powers seek to come to agreement at the expense of democracy in Syria. Yet the common people of Syria have continued the struggle for year after year; they deserve the support of working people everywhere. That is the measure of true internationalism and anti-imperialism. (See page 24)

UAW imposes multi-tier wage contracts

It’s common in the left to talk about the need to unite with the labor movement. Unfortunately, this is often regarded as coming to terms with the current labor leaders. But the struggle in 2015 over new contracts with the Big 3 auto companies showed the gulf between the dissatisfied workers and the UAW leadership. Despite record profits for the auto companies and a bulging UAW strike fund, the UAW leadership put forward contracts that continue concessions and turn worker against worker through adding yet another tier to the wage structure. Rank-and-file workers voted down one tentative contract, but similar contracts eventually were ratified. (See page 30)

And more ... Greece, Venezuela, South African workers, Black lives matter!, the Marxist attitude to cosmology, and the sins of Trotskyism


What is Communist Voice?

Communist Voice is a theoretical journal which not only exposes the capitalist system, but deals with the tragedy that has befallen the revolutionary movement. It confronts the thorny questions and controversies facing progressive activists today, and holds that the crisis of the working class movement can only be overcome if Marxist theory again enlightens the struggle for the emancipation of the oppressed. The liberating ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin have been twisted beyond recognition, not only by outright capitalist spokespeople, but also by the false “communist” regimes of China, Cuba and others today, and of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of yesterday. Communist Voice denounces these distortions (revisions) of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism — whether Stalinism or Trotskyism or reformism — and stands for placing revolutionary theory on a solid basis through the criticism of revisionism and by analyzing the new developments in the basic economic and political structure of the world today. Through this work, the Communist Voice seeks to pave the way for communism to once again become the red, fighting banner of the revolutionary working class movement. Only the influence of the real communist theory can help the goal of a classless, communist society again spread among the workers and oppressed here and around the globe. Only the spread of anti-revisionist Marxism can overcome the influence of liberal, reformist and petty-bourgeois nationalist trends and allow the struggle against capitalism to break out in full force.

The revolutionary parties and movements of the working class in the 19th and 20th centuries never achieved their full goals. The working masses fought monarchy, fascism, colonialism, and various capitalist classes, and also made their first attempts to establish a new social system — however these attempts never went beyond the first steps. This class struggle will be renewed in the 21st century, as the masses are faced with how to escape from the escalating misery brought by capitalist development around the world. To hasten the day of the revival of the revolutionary movement, the CV opposes the neo-liberal and reformist ideologies that are dominant today. It holds that progressive work today requires more than opposing the ultra-conservatives and more than trying to reform the marketplace. It means helping reorganize the working class movement on a basis independent of the liberals and reformists as well as the conservatives. The CV sees its theoretical tasks as helping to clear the way for a future reorganization of the working class into, first and foremost, its own political party, as well as other organizations that truly uphold proletarian class interests.

Communist Voice thus continues the Marxist-Leninist and anti-revisionist cause to which its predecessor, the Workers’ Advocate, was dedicated. For a quarter of a century, the Workers’ Advocate was the paper of a series of activist organizations, the last one being the Marxist-Leninist Party. The demoralization of the revolutionary ranks included the dissolution of the MLP and, along with it, the Workers’ Advocate. But the Communist Voice continues, in a different form, with fewer resources, and with more emphasis on theoretical work, the struggle of the Workers’ Advocate to contribute to the development of a mass communist party.

The Communist Voice is published by the Communist Voice Organization, which links together members in a few cities. The CVO calls on all activists who want to fight capitalism in all its guises to join with us in opposing all the bankrupt theories and practices of the past — from Western-style capitalism to Stalinist state capitalism, from reformism to anarchism, from reliance on the pro-capitalist trade union bigwigs to “left” communist sectarianism toward “impure” struggles. It is time to lay the basis for the revolutionary communist of the future by revitalizing the communist theory and practice of today. Only when communism spreads among the millions and millions of oppressed can the struggle against capitalism again become a force that shakes the world!

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The UN climate change summit conference in Paris
November 30 - December 12, 2015

The governments pat themselves on the back while the planet burns

The “red lines” demonstration in Paris was the best thing that happened at the Paris climate change summit. The 2015 UN climate conference was COP21, the 21st yearly session of the Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and simultaneously the 11th meeting of the parties to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. There were a lot of fancy words, as typical of UN conferences, but the conference basically was business as usual in the march toward climate catastrophe.

The red lines demonstrations, however, showed that activists aren’t going to leave things to the governments, and they demonstrated in the face of the “state of emergency” of the government of “socialist” president Francois Hollande. “We are the red lines” demonstrations also took place elsewhere, such as in Seattle and New York City. The demonstrators were concerned that the negotiators in Paris would cross various “red lines”.

The media is making a big fuss over the outcome of the Paris summit on global warming. The Paris agreement has been hailed as encouraging progress, more than what various environmentalists expected, or even a landmark agreement. Even many demonstrators and critics of COP21 generally said that it was positive in many ways. Yet the reality is that the Paris summit was an environmental flop. Compared to the infamous Copenhagen climate summit of 2009, Paris was a smashing success in giving positive spin to the actions of the bourgeoisie and the governments, but it remained an abject failure in dealing with the danger of global warming.

It declared grand goals while ignoring the question of how to achieve them. Its standpoint was to let everyone do what they want — “clean coal”, nuclear, so-called transitional fuels, biofuels, or just plain hocus-pocus — so long as they declare it part of a plan. The summit closed its eyes to the failure of the market measures of the past, such as cap and trade, and these measures will continue. It met while thousands of fires raged through Indonesia, burning up rain forest and disgorging tremendous amount of carbon dioxide, and it had no answer to it. It talked about “transparency”, and there will be no real transparency.

The environmental writer George Monbiot wrote about the Paris summit as follows:

“A combination of acidifying seas, coral death and Arctic melting means that entire marine food chains could collapse. On land, rainforests may retreat, rivers fail and deserts spread. Mass extinction is likely to be the hallmark of our era. This is what success, as defined by the cheering delegates, will look like.” (“Grand promises of Paris climate deal undermined by squalid retrenchments”, Dec. 12, Guardian)

His article added:

“In Paris the delegates have solemnly agreed to cut demand, but at home they seek to maximise supply. The UK government has even imposed a legal obligation upon itself, under the Infrastructure Act 2015, to ‘maximise economic recovery’ of the UK’s oil and gas. Extracting fossil fuels is a hard fact. But the Paris agreement is full of soft facts: promises that can slip or unravel. Until governments undertake to keep fossil fuels in the ground, they will continue to undermine the agreement they have just made.”

Yet, surprisingly, while saying that the Paris agreement is a disaster compared to what’s needed, Monbiot also writes in his article that “By comparison to what it could have been, it’s a miracle.” No, not at all. There’s nothing positive in the destroyers of the environment pretending that they are protecting it. In that respect, the environmental scientist and climate change activist James Hansen hit the nail on the head when he said of the Paris summit that

“It’s a fraud really, a fake. It’s just bullshit for them to say: ‘We’ll have a 2°C warming target and then try to do a little better every five years.’ It’s just worthless words. There is no action.”

(“James Hansen, father of climate change awareness, calls Paris talks ‘a fraud’,” Dec. 12, Guardian)

Unfortunately, Hansen advocates that the carbon tax is the solution (as well as mistakenly backing an increase in the use of nuclear power). He doesn’t understand that the carbon tax is simply a variant of the market methods that have gotten us into this mess in the first place. We need direct planning and regulation of energy production, not reliance on market incentives. We also need economic planning to back up the planning and regulation of energy, to deal with other environmental problems, and to protect people’s livelihood in the massive economic dislocations that are coming.

None of this will happen unless there is a militant movement insisting that the planning be done in public with the broadest mass participation, and unless there is a strong working class trend within the environmental movement. Neo-liberal fake planning and regulation, which means companies “self-regulate” and governments subcontract out their functions to company stooges, is worse than useless.

Left to themselves, the governments and the ruling bourgeoisie may place their hope in supposed technical fixes to the problem of carbon emissions. They are considering considering very dangerous geo-engineering plans, such as building a giant space parasol to shield the earth from the sun or dumping vast
amounts of iron in the ocean. And part of the environmental movement, discouraged by the lack of progress at the climate summits, is hoping that new market measures, such as the carbon tax, will somehow do better than cap and trade and the old market measures. Some environmentalists have also given in to the idea of a technical fix and look to covering the world with nuclear power stations, closing their eyes to the lessons of Fukushima and Chernobyl.

The Paris summit shows that the environment can’t be left to the bourgeoisie and the present-day governments. What we need is mass struggle for fundamental change, mass struggle that doesn’t conciliate the market fanatics but puts the interests of the environment and mass welfare to the fore.

— Joseph Green

Paris climate terror could endure for generations

By Patrick Bond, South Africa

Paris witnessed both explicit terrorism by religious extremists on November 13 and a month later, implicit terrorism by carbon addicts negotiating a world treaty that guarantees catastrophic climate change. The first incident left more than 130 people dead in just one evening’s mayhem; the second lasted a fortnight but over the next century can be expected to kill hundreds of millions, especially in Africa.

But because the latest version of the annual United Nations climate talks has three kinds of spin-doctors, the extent of damage may not be well understood. The 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) generated reactions ranging from smug denialism to righteous fury. The first reaction is ‘from above’ (the Establishment) and is self-satisfied; the second is from the middle (‘Climate Action’) and is semi-satisfied; the third, from below (‘Climate Justice’), is justifiably outraged.

Guzzling French champagne last Saturday, the Establishment quickly proclaimed, in essence, “The Paris climate glass is nearly full – so why not get drunk on planet-saving rhetoric?” The New York Times reported with a straight face, “President Obama said the historic agreement is a tribute to American climate change leadership” (and in a criminally-negligent way, this is not untrue).

Since 2009, US State Department chief negotiator Todd Stern successfully drove the negotiations away from four essential principles: ensuring emissions-cut commitments would be sufficient to halt runaway climate change; making the cuts legally binding with accountability mechanisms; distributing the burden of cuts fairly based on responsibility for causing the crisis; and making financial transfers to repair weather-related loss and damage following directly from that historic liability. Washington elites always prefer ‘market mechanisms’ like carbon trading instead of paying their climate debt even though the US national carbon market fatally crashed in 2010.

In part because the Durban COP17 in 2011 provided lubrication and – with South Africa’s blessing – empowered Stern to wreck the idea of Common But Differentiated Responsibility while giving “a Viagra shot to flailing carbon markets” (as a male Bank of America official cheerfully celebrated), Paris witnessed the demise of these essential principles. And again, “South Africa played a key role negotiating on behalf of the developing countries of the world,” according to Pretoria’s environment minister Edna Molewa, who proclaimed from Paris “an ambitious, fair and effective legally-binding outcome.”

Arrogant fibbery. The collective Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) – i.e. voluntary cuts – will put the temperature rise at above 3 degrees [Centigrade–CV]. From coal-based South Africa, the word ambitious loses meaning given Molewa’s weak INDCs – ranked by Climate-ActionTracker as amongst the world’s most “inadequate” – and given that South Africa hosts the world’s two largest coal-fired power stations now under construction, with no objection by Molewa. She regularly approves increased (highly-subsidized) coal burning and exports, vast fracking, offshore-oil drilling, exemptions from pollution regulation, emissions-intensive corporate farming and fast-worsening suburban sprawl.

A second narrative comes from large NGOs that mobilized over the past six months to provide mild-mannered pressure points on negotiators. Their line is, essentially, “The Paris glass is partly full – so sip up and enjoy!”

This line derives not merely from the predictable back-slapping associated with petit-bourgeois vanity, gazing upwards to power for validation, such as one finds at the Worldwide Fund for Nature and Climate Action Network, what with their corporate sponsorships. All of us reading this are often tempted in this direction, aren’t we, because such unnatural twisting of the neck is a permanent occupational hazard in this line of work.

And such opportunism was to be expected from Paris, especially after Avaaz and Greenpeace endorsed G7 leadership posturing in June, when at their meeting in Germany the Establishment made a meaningless commitment to a decarbonized economy – in the year 2100, at least fifty years too late.

Perhaps worse than their upward gaze, though, the lead NGOs suffered a hyper-reaction to the 2009 Copenhagen Syndrome. Having hyped the COP15 Establishment negotiators as “Seal the Deal!” planet-saviours, NGOs mourned the devastating Copenhagen Accord signed in secret by leaders from Washington, Brasilia, Beijing, New Delhi and Pretoria. This was soon followed by a collapse of climate consciousness and mobilization. Such alienation is often attributed to activist heart-break: a roller-coaster of raised NGO expectations and plummeting Establishment performance.

Possessing only an incremental theory of social change, NGOs toasting the Paris deal now feel the need to confirm that they did as best they could, and that they have grounds to continue along the same lines in future. To be sure, insider-oriented persuasion tactics pursued by the 42-million member clicktivist group Avaaz are certainly impressive in their breadth and scope. Yet for Avaaz, “most importantly, [the
The glass is full of toxic fairy dust—don’t dare even sniff!” The traditional Climate Justice (CJ) stance is to delegitimize the Establishment and return the focus of activism to grassroots sites of struggle, in future radically changing the balance of forces locally, nationally and then globally. But until that change in power is achieved, the UNFCCC COPs are just Conferences of Polluters.

The landless movement Via Campesina was clearest: “There is nothing binding for states, national contributions lead us towards a global warming of over 3°C and multinational are the main beneficiaries. It was essentially a media circus.”

Asad Rehman coordinates climate advocacy at the world’s leading North-South CJ organization, Friends of the Earth International: “The reviews [of whether INDCs are adhered to and then need strengthening] are too weak and too late. The political number mentioned for finance has no bearing on the scale of need. It’s empty. The iceberg has struck, the ship is going down and the band is still playing to warm applause.”

And not forgetting the voice of climate science, putting it most bluntly, James Hansen called Paris, simply, “bullshit.”

Where does that leave us? If the glass-half-full NGOs get serious—and I hope to be pleasantly surprised in 2016—then the only way forward is for them to apply their substantial influence on behalf of solidarity with those CJ activists making a real difference, at the base.

Close to my own home, the weeks before COP21 witnessed potential victories in two major struggles: opposition to corporate coal mining—led mainly by women peasants, campaigners and lawyers—in rural Zululand, bordering the historic iMfolozi wilderness reserve (where the world’s largest white rhino population is threatened by poachers); and South Durban residents fighting the massive expansion of Africa’s largest port-petrochemical complex. In both attacks, the climate-defence weapon was part of the activists’ arsenal.

But it is only when these campaigns have conclusively done the work COP negotiators and NGO cheerleaders just shirked—leaving fossil fuels in the ground and pointing the way to a just, post-carbon society—that we can raise our glasses and toast humanity, with integrity. Until then, pimps for the Paris Conference of Polluters should be told to sober up and halt what will soon be understood as their fatal attack on Mother Earth.

December 15, 2015
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Patrick Bond is a South African social and environmental activist and author of many works such as the book *Politics of Climate Justice: Paralysis Above, Movement Below.*
Yesterday, April 22, was Earth Day, 2015. It took place at a time when environmental devastation is increasing on land and sea, and climate change is a visible reality. Despite this, the bourgeois governments aren’t doing much. In this regard, the growth of the environmental movement faces two dangers: there is a large section of rich exploiters, like the natural gas frackers and the billionaire Koch brothers, who are into climate denial and are destroying the environment faster and faster, and there are establishment environmentalists that talk a good game, but won’t fundamentally oppose the big corporate polluters and instead promote market measures that don’t do much or even backfire.

Denying the evidence before one’s eyes

Scientists have known for years that human-caused global warming is a major threat. Its been twenty-five years since the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its first assessment report pointing out that global warming had already begun, and that a devastating additional warming of 3 degrees Celsius (about 5.5 degrees Fahrenheit) was likely in the 21st century if the fossil fuel economy continued with “business-as-usual”. The IPCC is a very conservative body as far as its summation of modern science; it accepts only what it has to accept; so its report showed that no serious scientific doubt remained.

But capitalists will do anything to live like kings at the expense of their workers and the public. If they could deny for decades that cigarettes caused cancer, or that lead-based paint were major public health disasters, they can also deny that burning carbon fuels has anything to do with the climate. So many capitalists and conservative politicians still deny the danger of human-caused climate change, and there have been repeated attempts to discredit climate science. Climate denial may not have science on its side, but it has a lot of big money behind it.

This denial goes on while the world suffers from one hot year after another, and while countries face cleaning up after one environmental disaster after another. The combination of global warming and the indecent waste inherent in capitalist agriculture and industry is giving rise to increasing problems:

* The California water shortage is but the latest in a series of droughts, water shortages, and wildfires that are taking place with increasing frequency around the world. There are many causes for natural catastrophes, and no one drought or fire can be linked directly to global warming. But global warming is setting the stage for more and more disasters. In the case of California, the water shortage is also due to a century of rapid capitalist development without much attention to the ecological features of the land.
* As far as the average over the entire world, 2014 was the hottest year yet recorded. Moreover, the ten hottest years have all been since 1998.
* There is a proliferation of earthquakes in Texas, Oklahoma, Ohio and elsewhere as a result of fracking and the disposal of waste water from oil and gas operations.
* Life in the world’s oceans is threatened from acidification as the water absorbs excess carbon, from overfishing, and from dead zones from the accumulation of all the garbage thrown into the ocean.
* The speed of destruction of the Amazon rain forest is picking up again.
* And every day brings news of another ruptured pipeline, another earthquake, another sign of worst things to come.

Big Green merges with Big Business

The large establishment environmental organizations oppose denialism. But they don’t oppose the corporate polluters with militant action: instead, they seek to make deals with them. In her book This Changes Everything Naomi Klein has a chapter subtitled “The Disastrous Merger of Big Business and Big Green”. She points out that “The big corporate-affiliated green groups don’t deny the reality of climate change — many work hard to raise the alarm. And yet several of these groups have consistently, and aggressively, pushed responses to climate change that are the least burdensome, and often directly beneficial, to the largest greenhouse gas emitters on the planet — even when the policies...
come at the direct expense of communities fighting to keep fossil fuels in the ground. Rather than advancing policies that treat greenhouse gases as dangerous pollutants demanding clear, enforceable regulations that would restrict emissions and create the conditions for a full transition to renewables, these groups have pushed convoluted market-based schemes that have treated greenhouse gases as late-capitalist abstractions to be traded, bundled, speculated upon, and moved around the globe like currency or subprime debt.” (pp. 198-9)

Indeed, Klein points out that many of these groups “have championed one of the main fossil fuels – natural gas – as a supposed solution to climate change, despite mounting evidence that in the coming decades, the methane it releases, particularly through the fracking process, has the potential to help lock us into catastrophic levels of warming ... In some cases, large foundations have collaborated to explicitly direct the U.S. Green movement towards these policies. ... The ‘market-based’ climate solutions favored by so many large foundations and adopted by many greens have provided an invaluable service to the fossil fuel sector as a whole. For one, they have succeeded in taking what began as a straightforward debate about shifting away from fossil fuels and put it through a jargon generator so convoluted that the entire climate issue came to seem too complex and arcane for nonexperts to understand, seriously undercutting the potential to build a mass movement capable of taking on powerful polluters.” (p. 199)

Klein traces the recent history of the environmental movement and points out that the 1980s were a major turning point. The Reagan administration attacked environmental regulations, and the big establishment environmentalists capitulated to this:

“...In the 1980s, extreme free market ideology became the discourse of power, the language that elites were speaking to one another, even if large parts of the general public remained unpersuaded. That meant for the mainstream green movement, confronting the antigovernment logic of market triumphalism head-on would have meant exiling themselves to the margins. And many of the big-budget green groups having grown comfortable with their access to power and general support from large, elite foundations were unwilling to do that.” (p. 205)

Moreover, new groups appeared that “pitched themselves as modern environmentalists for the Reagan era: pro-business, non-confrontational, and ready to help polish even the tarnished corporate logos.” (p. 206)

The militant struggle continues

Klein points out that this led to splits within the environmental movement, as some new groups were formed that added to the part of the movement focused on confrontations with the polluters, rather than taking their money or greenwashing them. And over and over we see that many rank-and-file members of Big Green groups have been upset when they find out about the deals carried out by the leadership of their organizations. This was particularly notable when it came out that Big Green had deals with BP after its giant oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

But Big Green isn’t everything. A militant movement has always existed: the establishment environmentalists are only the bourgeois-oriented section of the movement. People won’t let the bourgeoisie poison the planet and their communities in silence. No matter how much money the foundations pour into the movement, no matter how much the leadership of Big Green preaches about working hand-in-hand with the corporations, the struggle will continue, and the class issues will eventually come to the surface.

There are different currents in the militant movement:

- There are those who have concentrated on fights to leave the coal and oil in the ground. Many fights have taken place against proposed new coal plants, against pipelines, against ill-conceived giant hydro projects, against harmful mining projects, and against the threats to various species.

- The rapid spread of fracking has led to a major movement against it. Many new people, not previously part of the environmental movement, have taken part, as the devastation of the land and water of one community after another by the frackers continues.

- The climate justice movement has linked the fight against global warming with the needs of indigenous communities, working people, and developing countries. It has denounced a number of market measures and programs of bourgeois environmentalism.

These and other currents of struggle continue. But there are limits to how far the militant movement has developed a separate program from establishment environmentalism. It remains wary of overall environmental planning, and it has usually avoided assessing directly the programs of Gore and the IPCC. While denouncing market measures, it has generally failed to recognize the carbon tax as another market measure. But the carbon tax is a serious threat to environmental goals, not only because it will fail to achieve the necessary reductions in the use of carbon fuels, but because it converts the slogan of “tax the polluter” into “tax the people” and thus threatens to undermine mass support for environmentalism.

Build a working class environmental movement!

It is up to the working-class movement to develop a realistic program to deal with the environmental crisis. The bourgeois economists will never get it right, and the leaders of the establishment movement will always value their place at the capitalist table higher than the needs of protecting the
earth. There has always been a hidden class struggle in the environmental issue, and real progress requires that the working class bring this struggle out into the open.

- Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” must be banished from the environmental program. There must be environmental planning and regulation across the whole economy. The threat of global warming requires planning the entire carbon emissions of an economy. This requires not only regulating power plants and pipelines, but oversight of production in the economy as a whole.

- A world that is half green and half starving is a world that won’t be green at all. Environmental planning must be connected to climate justice and planning for the mass welfare of the working masses. That is the only way a truly powerful mass environmental movement can develop. Trickle-down economics is as much a mirage for a green economy as for the present economy: a green infrastructure does not automatically ensure jobs and welfare for all. Instead, the employment and welfare of the population must be a goal pursued alongside the environmental goals.

- Serious regulation requires an end to the privatization of government functions and a bitter fight against the takeover of government agencies by the corporations that are supposed to be regulated. There can be no serious regulation while the polluters make a farce out of “regulating” themselves. Environmental and economic planning must become more transparent; and the eyes and ears of the working class in every establishment must be enlisted in enforcing environmental protection and safety standards. Environmental reform will require not just the passive support of the working class as voting cattle, but their active participation in carrying out environmental goals. This is only possible if the economic planning that is eventually carried out reduces inequality and misery rather than amounting to subsidies for supposedly green capitalists and austerity for the people.

- Environmental planning must be done first and foremost in material, not financial terms. Otherwise it’s not really transparent (no one really understands complicated derivatives and market reports). Moreover, the land, sea, and atmosphere react to how many pounds of pollutants are poured into them, not the dollars and cents that appear on ledger sheets.

- The militant environmental movement must make direct connections with the workers, and not rely on the present class-collaborationist union leadership. Building a working class environmental movement requires radically transforming the present working class movement. The working class can only defend the earth when it learns to defend itself against the pro-capitalist bureaucrats who today speak in its name.

- Serious environmentalists must target the corporate polluters, rather than accommodating them. In issue after issue, the clash of environmental interests versus the profit-making of the 1% must be repeatedly brought to the fore.

No doubt many of these things can only be achieved partially while capitalism still exists. And the capitalists will constantly strive to take back every concession they make. But some progress along these lines is needed if the earth is to be protected. And the constant struggle over these points will help bring the class struggle to the fore and pave the way towards social revolution.

Assessing different trends in the environmental movement: some books of interest

This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate, 2014, by Naomi Klein

Naomi Klein takes for her theme that climate change isn’t just another issue, but is going to transform everything. And she is right. Market fundamentalism isn’t going to last forever. It is going to go up in flames as the environmental crisis deepens and as it also shows its increasing inability to provide water, housing, pensions, schooling, or health care to millions upon millions of people around the world. As Klein says, “The challenge . . . is not simply that we need to spend a lot of money and change a lot of policies; it’s that we need to think differently, radically differently, for those changes to be remotely possible. Right now, the triumph of market logic, with its ethos of domination and fierce competition, is paralyzing almost all serious efforts to respond to climate change.” (p.23)

The best sections of This Changes Everything raise issues that many other writers avert their eyes from, such as the faults of the major bourgeois environmental groups (“Big Green”), the threat of geo-engineering, and the failure of carbon trading, carbon offsets, and carbon markets.

Klein expresses the views of the militant section of the environmental movement. In line with this, the book defends confrontation with the polluters but doesn’t quite know how to build a conscious alternative to the establishment environmentalism of Big Green. But it provides a lot of information showing that this alternative is necessary.

Cooling It! No Hair Shirt Solutions to Global Warming, 2004, by Gar Lipow

Gar Lipow shows that it’s possible, with technology that already existed at the time of the book, to drastically cut carbon-based fuels, protect the environment, and yet maintain the standard of living. His book is notable for the loving care with which he treats complicated technical matters; he spared no effort in researching his subject. Moreover, technical progress in the decade since he wrote the book only reinforces his conclusions.

This book is important because, if it is correct that we have the technical capacity to slash greenhouse gas emissions, then it’s clear that the corporate exploiters are the real source of the danger of global warming. The capitalists don’t just insist that everything must be profitable; the present billionaires and large corporations insist that they must be the ones who make the profits, or else the world can go to hell. To stop the threat to the environment, there must be social and political changes, not simply new technical innovations.
In this book, as in his earlier work from 2006, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore sounds an alarm about the dangers facing the world from global warming. He has helped spread the word among masses of people, and he is influential among environmental activists as well as the establishment environmental groups.

But while he is right on the dangers facing us, he is wrong about the solutions. He has consistently advocated market solutions and covered up their repeated failure. He has consistently advocated work hand-in-hand with the big bourgeoisie.

He is silent about the need for overall environmental planning, and what this would mean for economic planning. And while he is influential among militant activists, it is notable that he is silent about them in this book: talking about them might disturb the big bourgeoisie.

Gore’s stand is similar to that of the IPCC. The IPCC has done good work in demonstrating the seriousness of the threat of global warming. Its reports correctly reflect the current state of climate science. But its proposals for solution are based, not on science, but on the market fundamentalist viewpoint of the governments represented at the UN. Climate science is one thing and deserves respect; bourgeois economics is another, and deserves opposition.

If there is to be a serious movement for climate justice and social change, it will have to go beyond Gore’s program and that of the IPCC. Moreover, it should not simply ignore Gore’s program and bourgeois environmentalism, but openly evaluate their policies and oppose the fiascoes which these policies have caused. But as of yet, even the more militant wing of the movement tends to be silent about Gore, or occasionally to denounce him for things other than his main environmental policies.

**Solving the Climate Crisis through Social Change: Public Investment in Social Prosperity to Cool a Fevered Planet, 2012, by Gar Lipow**

In this book, Gar Lipow takes on the question of how to achieve the technical changes he had outlined in his earlier book, *Cooling It!* He talks of the “massive political and economic change” which is needed, and of “the hard questions of organizing and winning” (p.1) And he denounces illusions in the rich. This is the path which we really need to take.

But in essence, he proposes that the movement keep on doing what it has already been doing, but be somewhat better at it. So he provides an intelligent discussion of details, while staying silent on the major obstacles to the movement dealing with social change. He evades big issues such as what attitude to have to the Democratic Party or the sell-out labor leaders. He is silent about Al Gore’s program, and whether he agrees with it or not, and yet Al Gore is influential among the activists whom Lipow is addressing. He evades the promised issues of major economic change, and talks of public investments rather than the replacement of market fundamentalism and privatization with an overall system of environmental and economic planning.

In brief, he evades the question of building a serious working class alternative to establishment environmentalism. But one can’t have a powerful movement for social change hand-in-hand with organizations committed to doing nothing that would fundamentally irritate the big bourgeoisie.

**Green Gone Wrong: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Eco-Capitalism, 2010, by Heather Rogers**

This book shows that many programs promoted as green causes have had sorry results. Heather Rogers looks into how many fashionable plans work in reality, such as carbon offsets; the marketing of supposedly ecologically-responsible products; biofuels such as biodiesel; and fair trade programs — she examines how they really affect small peasant farmers. She did a lot of painstaking personal investigation and, for example, visited Paraguay and talked to the people who grow sugarcane, and visited Borneo and saw what the production of palm oil was doing to the rainforest.

Rogers documents the failure of market measures to live up to the glorious claims made for them. For example, she shows how the certification methods used for organic and fair trade goods force small peasants into dependency on large corporate farms.

Indeed, she shows that market measures have repeatedly backfired. Among other things, she points out that even when governments say they are regulating things, it isn’t really so.

“Under the American system, the government isn’t directly tasked with day-to-day enforcement. Instead, it issues licenses to private certification companies for the job. Government officials can intervene when there’s a serious problem, but, otherwise, the certification firms call the shots.” (p. 62)

The result is that the mutual interests of the certification firms and the companies that they are supposedly regulating trump whatever the regulation was supposed to accomplish. Thus the privatization of government functions makes a mockery of supposed regulation. This is extremely important to understand: regulation is needed, but it must not be the privatized regulation developed in these days of market fundamentalism.

**Under the Dome, 2015, by Chai Jing**

This is not a book but a documentary film by a brave Chinese journalist, willing to risk the anger of the Chinese government. It can be found with English sub-titles at YouTube.com. It deals with the incredibly high levels of pollutants in Chinese air, which make Chinese cities such as Beijing into a nightmare version of London in the 19th century or Los Angeles before anti-smog measures were taken. The issue isn’t pollutant levels 10% above normal, but more than 10 times the safety levels set by the World Health Organization.

These pollutants are a direct and immediate threat to the health of Chinese people. They stem mainly from the massive
use of coal, but *Under the Dome* also documents the government’s disregard for elementary measures that could limit air pollution. Until prodded by ordinary people, the government bureaucrats don’t even bother to enforce their own regulations. There needs to be an environmental movement in China as well as the US.

Chai Jing stays away from politics. But one can hardly watch her documentary without seeing that state-capitalism, as in China, is no alternative to Western market capitalism. The same financial pressures, the same disdain for the masses, are manifested by the Chinese and American ruling classes.

*Durban’s Climate Gamble: Trading Carbon, Betting the Earth*, 2011, edited by Patrick Bond, and *Politics of Climate Justice: Paralysis Above, Movement Below*, by Patrick Bond

These two books reflect the militant environmental movement that has arisen in South Africa. It is not the African National Congress nor the South African Communist Party that are fighting to defend the environment and improve the conditions of the masses of workers; it is the protest movement among the people.

In November 2011 the 17th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was held in the major South African city of Durban. A “Global Day of Action” saw large protests against the UN meeting by activists in favor of climate justice. Some concentrated on denouncing the market solutions being set forward at the UN conference. Others were upset by the local environmental and social policies of the ANC government: for example, in the name of environmentalism, electricity subsidies for the masses were ended, while mining and metals corporations, the big sources of pollution, pay very little for power. *Durban’s Climate Gamble* discusses both the failure of market measures and the history of environmental conflict in Durban.

*The Politics of Climate Justice* traces the history of several UN climate conferences, summing up the results at Copenhagen (2009), Cancun (2010), and Durban (2011) as “deckchair shifting on the climate Titanic”. It shows how market measures are denounced by various sections of the militant environmental movement. The movement is strong on denouncing the continued development of further carbon-based fuel plants and carries out important environment actions, but, it seems to me, is skeptical of the overall environmental and economic planning that will be required in the future, unclear on the carbon tax and on the nature of certain governments, and still has trouble developing an overall stand towards Al Gore and the IPCC.

These books by Bond give a valuable picture of the climate justice movement, provide a lot of ammunition against a number of market measures, and show the growing importance of the movement from below in South Africa.
Build the environmental movement in opposition to both corporate parties... Obama’s pretty speeches against climate change are not enough!

The Seattle Communist Study Group issued the following leaflet for the occasion of Obama’s visit to Seattle on Friday, October 9, 2015 and to call for people to take part in the People’s Climate March of 2015 in Seattle.

The planet is rapidly heating up. This is mainly caused by burning fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas), but also by deforestation of peat lands, the release of the methane from fracking operations, and more. So there is no wonder why there is elation that Shell Oil decided to stop drilling exploratory wells in the Arctic Ocean. But that’s just for now in one part of the Arctic. Shell is not going to give up oil drilling until it is made to. In fact, the company has announced it may still set up a base to support its offshore drilling operations at Seattle’s Terminal 5. Meanwhile, there are proposals for twelve new or expanded oil terminals and refineries in Washington State, which means even longer oil trains will run through the Columbia Gorge and elsewhere — including through Seattle. Driven by the profit motive, this business-as-usual course is leading to eco-disaster.

Obama has begun talking a good fight...

In his September 1 speech at GLACIER conference in Anchorage [GLACIER stands for “Global Leadership in the Arctic: Cooperation, Innovation, Engagement & Resilience”], Obama said much that everyone with concern for the Earth and its inhabitants has long been saying. He said “the science is stark” regarding climate change, and the “once-distant threat is now very much in the present.” He went on at length describing what science shows is happening to our ecosystem, including about how this is affecting indigenous peoples. He talked about renewables. He said climate change was the issue “of all issues,” and he repeatedly said “we’re not moving fast enough.”

...but what is his real record?

Many environmentalists have pointed out the crying hypocrisy of Obama making this grand speech while a few hundred miles away Shell was drilling for oil in a pristine Arctic that his administration had opened to drilling! Indeed, Obama has also opened the Atlantic seaboard for oil drilling. He’s boasted about gaining “energy independence” though more oil drilling and more shale fracking—which also poisons the waters and releases methane. His BLM [Bureau of Land Management] plans to issue 28 new coal leases, which could open up mining of billions of tons of coal over the next 20 years. And while radioactive waste piles up everywhere, he’s licensed two more dangerous nuclear power plants in his “all of the above” approach to global warming.

...and what are his solutions?

Obama never once attacked the polluting corporations in his Anchorage speech. Instead, he shielded them with talk about we don’t want our lifestyles disrupted (as if the people were the problem), we have to do some adaptation, etc. And protection of corporate profits is at the root of Obama’s hypocrisy. Thus, while the Republican right denies that global warming is caused by human activity, the Democrats deny that they have to do more than tinker with market measures, market incentives and the like in order to seriously deal with it.

Thus, when the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress their proposed legislation was a “cap-and-trade” bill that died. But cap-and-trade is a complicated system many countries have used since the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Under it the polluters buy and sell pollution permits which the governments gradually issue fewer of as years go by. And it has failed miserably in reducing carbon emissions the needed amount. Moreover, its provisions to give the polluting corporations “carbon offsets” for planting such things as palm-oil plantations for biodiesel and other products have been ecological and human disasters: people are driven from the land, rain forests (part of the Earth’s lungs) are destroyed, and huge amounts of CO2 are released from drying peat lands. This is a main reason why Indonesia jumped to being the third largest carbon emitter.

Now, years later, Obama has issued a number of executive orders. But these are drops in the bucket when compared to what’s really needed to stem global warming. Moreover, while Obama says he wants to get binding commitments to reduce carbon emissions at the Nov. 30 - Dec.11 COP21 meeting in Paris, the framework of the snail’s-pace United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change remains cap-and-trade and other bankrupt market solutions! This entire framework must be broken with and replaced with another. Yet right in the movement today we have another complicated market “solution” being promoted, the carbon tax. This is a regressive tax which is then dressed up as neutral if the polluters actually do all the things claimed it will make them do. It will tend to drive working and poor people away from the environmental movement by raising their cost of living, and still not do enough to curb carbon emissions.

Building a politically independent environmental movement

In opposition to vainly looking for better market methods with which to nudge the polluters while preserving their profits a la Obama, the movement must stand for direct regulations, and bans: Ban oil rigs in the Arctic, ban fracking, etc. But new laws enforced by inspector-short and corporation-captured government regulatory agencies will mean nothing unless there is a large and active movement demanding enforcement, and
Pope Francis denounces both climate deniers and carbon credits

by Pete Brown, Detroit Workers’ Voice
from the DWV list for September 21, 2015

On Sept. 24 Pope Francis will visit Washington, D.C. and address the U.S. Congress. A mass rally on the National Mall is planned for that same day in support of environmental goals, and organizers of the rally are hoping the pope will recognize and possibly address them. The pope’s visit became a reason for a “green” rally after mid-June when Pope Francis issued an encyclical (a major statement) on environmental issues titled On Care for Our Common Home. There he plainly stated, “humans are contributing to unprecedented destruction of ecosystems.” After that a number of environmental organizations joined together to express support for the pope’s encyclical and planned a demonstration on the occasion of his visit. These groups include Moral Action on Climate Network, Earth Day Network, the League of Conservation Voters, and Sierra Club. But many establishment environmentalist organizations like these also support carbon pricing schemes like the ones Francis denounces in his encyclical.

In his statement Pope Francis chided world leaders for not coming to agreement on effective measures to combat global warming, and he criticized climate change “deniers.” He says warming “…has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved absolutely devastating for farming.” And further, “…recent World Summits on the environment have not lived up to expectations because, due to lack of political will, they were unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment.” This sums up the failure of the Kyoto Protocol, which relied on market methods to reduce carbon emissions and was a big flop. Kyoto set up a system of cap-and-trade where supposedly the countries that signed would cap their carbon emissions and trade carbon credits in order to gradually reduce their output of CO2 into the atmosphere. The pope correctly notes this was a failure in section 171 of his encyclical:

“The strategy of buying and selling ‘carbon credits’ can lead to a new form of speculation which would not help reduce the emission of polluting gases worldwide. This system seems to provide a quick and easy solution under the guise of a certain commitment to the environment, but in no way does it allow for the radical change which present circumstances require. Rather, it may simply become a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors.”

Many establishment environmentalist organizations and media (The New York Times, CNN, MSNBC, etc.) have tried to gloss over this statement of the pope’s and the failure of Kyoto. Liberal politicians of the Democratic Party take it as gospel that we must have carbon pricing schemes in order to control CO2 emissions. They try to force environmental reform ideas into the straitjacket of market fundamentalism, and this includes their proposals for a carbon tax. But the carbon tax, like other market-oriented schemes, is based on the idea that the market will solve any problems that arise; the only thing that needs to be adjusted, they say, is for the government to impose a tax on carbon to raise its price.

After that the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith will take care of carbon emissions and global warming. They say this policy would hasten the transition to renewable energy, but the only thing for sure it would do is anger many people and turn them against environmentalism. Francis’ encyclical does not talk explicitly about the carbon tax, but his denunciation of
market methods goes against the logic of the carbon tax:

“The principle of the maximization of profits, frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of the very concept of the economy. As long as production is increased, little concern is given to whether it is at the cost of future resources or the health of the environment; ...” (Section 195 of the encyclical.)

Although the church has never accepted socialism and has backed capitalism in practice, it has also never accepted the capitalist market as the end-all solution to life’s problems. Francis continues this when he says, “... by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion.” But he also speaks out more topically and forcefully about the failures of market fundamentalism, for example:

“Our care for the environment is intimately connected to our care for each other. ... We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. ... The rich and powerful shut themselves up within self-enclosed enclaves, compulsively consuming the latest goods ... while ignoring the plight of the poor. The poor find themselves on the run from natural disasters and degraded habitats ... with decreasing access to natural resources.” On a recent visit to Bolivia Francis denounced unequal multinational trade deals and said, “Unbridled capitalism is the dung of the devil.”

These are the sorts of statements that get ignored by the American media even as they report on Francis’ concern for the environment.

Francis’ encyclical is part of his attempt to make the church more relevant to modern life. He’s known for being more accessible than previous popes, for having a human touch and sympathy for the poor. Since taking office Francis has adopted a more liberal attitude towards abortion and annullments and called on Europe to be more welcoming to migrants. He’s also asserted that access to safe drinkable water is “a basic and universal human right,” something all those in charge of water utilities—including the water bureaucrats in Detroit, who continue to threaten thousands of people with cutoffs—should bear in mind.

But while recognizing present political stalemates Francis does not draw out the implications, that to change the situation we need a movement of ordinary working people that combines the two questions, social and environmental. And the method of class struggle, so successful in the social realm, needs to be brought into the environmental movement.

Francis instead tries to appeal to the rich to have sympathy for the poor and regard for nature; but this is a vain attempt. He says structural injustices require political will and sacrifice to overcome, but he doesn’t say whose political will, or whose sacrifice; he doesn’t try to describe what methods should be used or what sections of the population can be mobilized. Francis calls on people to carpool, recycle, etc. and practice other “simple daily gestures.” These are nice, but what’s needed to avert environmental disaster is a complete revamping of the economy, to make a rapid transition to non-carbon technology with extensive economic planning.

Francis tries to maintain a broad humanistic outlook that embraces the energy billionaires as people and exhorts them to care for the poor. But we know how far that will go. Look at the hundreds of thousands of decent, ordinary human beings they have massacred in the past 20 years in oil wars in the Mideast. Does this look like the record of humanistic beings with a care for the poor? Look at the thousands of people they cut off from heat every winter, or the people in Detroit who have their water cut off. Is this a system of concern for the poor?

Francis is correct that we need a rapid transition to a non-carbon economy “without delay.” What he doesn’t note is this will require massive economic planning. This must include planning to maintain and expand the welfare of the poor and the working millions. To make sure decisions are taken correctly, we need mass influence on government planning and decision-making similar to what people demanded to end segregation and racist institutions in the 1950s-60s. Ordinary working people must have oversight over corporate compliance with environmental regulations just as corporations could not be depended upon, on their own, to provide equal pay, benefits and promotional opportunities to black and white employees. Under the present system corporations report their own use of chemicals, their own oil spills, etc., and frackers don’t even have to report what chemicals they use. This is a system of the fox guarding the henhouse.

Pope Francis rejects the anti-scientific “deniers” and urges people to have concern for the world they leave behind them. He’s right to connect this to social issues and to oppose “dung of the devil” market fundamentalists. He’s wrong, however, to overlook the political movement needed to overcome present stagnation. We need a mass movement for the urgent measures needed to preserve the environment and our livelihoods.
Some issues in the environmental movement

Report on “Teach-In + 50” at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor

by Pete Brown
From the DWV list for April 2, 2015

This teach-in was held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first teach-in held at U of M in 1965 to protest the war in Vietnam. This current event was labeled “End the War Against the Planet”, and the idea was to connect the anti-war movement of the 1960s to the environmental movement of 2015. The teach-in lasted two days and had three plenary sessions with lectures about the environmental crisis and how it might be possible to make the transition to a carbon-free economy. I attended the morning session on Saturday, March 28 with an anti-fracking activist from the Detroit area.

The session we attended lasted two hours and had four speakers with a few hundred in the audience. The first speaker was TOM HAYDEN, former 1960s activist, co-founder of SDS and later a Democratic Party congressman from California and environmental adviser to Gov. Jerry Brown. He headed Brown’s commission on the transition to renewables in the 1970s when Brown was governor, and he holds the same job again today. The title of Hayden’s speech was “Ending the wars over fossil fuels.”

Hayden tried to make some connection to the 1960s by showing slides of old pictures – his boyhood home, Hayden as a student at U of M, Vietnam killings, etc. – but it didn’t connect to the main content of his speech. The main point of his speech was: the way to resolve issues is to trust bureaucrats like him to take care of things and develop voluntary agreements between states. He didn’t mention any activist movements against environmental pollution. He did mention that under his and Brown’s wise guidance California now gets 15% of its electric power from renewables, and that the way forward is for California to make voluntary agreements with other states so they can come up to California standards. This was a glaring problem in his speech, as he also insisted that the oil and gas industry will never do anything voluntarily to reduce emissions or cut back on carbon burning. If they won’t do anything voluntarily, and they hold extensive political power in the states as Hayden asserts, how is it they can ever be corralled?

The only answer Hayden gave was: put Democrats like him and Brown in office. He said Michigan made a lot of environmental progress under the previous governor, Democrat Jennifer Granholm (Really? – didn’t notice), but now is sliding backward under the Republican Gov. Rick Snyder. Al Gore’s defeat in the election of 2000, Hayden said, was the worst disaster ever for environmentalism, the last chance we had before we’re swamped by pollution and global warming. Does that mean Democratic President Obama is no good? Not at all; Hayden also defended Obama against attacks on his policies by people like Naomi Klein.

So Hayden’s idea for ending the wars over fossil fuels is to put peacemakers like him and Brown in office and then wait for them to come up with rational plans that everyone will volunteer to accept. It doesn’t include activism or protests, it doesn’t include mobilizing the working class, and it doesn’t include having the masses supervise and enforce environmental safeguards. Not surprisingly, Hayden’s speech left the audience cold.

The next speaker was JAHI CHAPPELL, Director of Agroecology and Agriculture Policy at the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Chappell’s speech was billed as “setting the table for what comes after capitalism”, which attracted some interest, particularly when Chappell began connecting the transition from capitalism to social issues. For example, he advised environmental activists to connect up to social movements like the protests against racist police murders. But his idea of capitalism was weak, as he equated it with neo-liberalism, and his “alternative” was largely focused on only changing trade policy. Outside of that he wandered into the thickets of academic jargon, promoting “eco-commensalism” as the alternative to capitalism. With “polycentric” decision-making, he promised, citizens could “explore the grammar of co-operation”. What it came down to was that citizens should be active in local government budgetary decisions. Trouble is, the oil and gas industry is organized on a national, not local, scale; they’re not subject to government budgets, since they’re a private industry; and they have money enough to control any local body like your typical town council. This kind of advice was a comedy from getting active in national protests like those against the racist police murders in Ferguson, New York, etc. So Chappell ended up losing those in the audience looking for an alternative.

The next speaker was ARTHUR WASKOW, a Jewish rabbi and older activist who spoke at the original 1965 teach-in. His speech was titled “Facing the Carbon Pharaohs: The Role of Spiritual Communities in Organizing to Heal Our Climate Crisis.” Waskow connected the climate crisis to Bible stories like Moses standing up to Pharaoh and said we need to take a stand like the native fighters in the movie Avatar. He endorsed and promoted Bill McKibben’s call to divest from oil and gas, and he especially appealed to students to demand that U of M switch from coal to renewables. This was the only direct, concrete suggestion made by any of the speakers, and he got a rousing standing ovation for his speech. No doubt there were students in the audience who would take his admonitions to heart and begin organizing. Some of his speech wandered off into spiritualism, but the audience appreciated his enthusiasm for activism.

The next speaker was SANDRA STEINGRABER, a professor of environmental health in New York who, as an
activist, helped get fracking banned there. The challenge now, she related, is getting fracking waste banned. There’s no fracking in New York, but waste disposal companies want to truck in wastewater from fracking sites from other Northeast states and store it in salt domes near Seneca Lake, one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. This shows one of the dangers of fracking: aside from possibly polluting the fracking site itself, drilling companies have millions of gallons of leftover wastewater after finishing their job. The wastewater is polluted with chemicals used to fracture underground rock, and on the way back up to the surface it takes in other minerals, even radioactive ones. New rules proposed by Obama’s EPA stipulate that this wastewater cannot just be dumped into the environment. But then, what do the companies do with it? Storing it underground in salt domes creates the possibility of polluting a site hundreds of miles away from any fracking site. This shows that the problems with fracking don’t end at the fracking site itself, and why it’s important to get this practice banned.

Steingraber aroused interest by speaking about the need to talk to everyone you meet, give educational talks in libraries, church basements, etc. She gave examples, both personal anecdotes and from opinion surveys, of how people’s attitudes have changed toward fracking and global warming. She encouraged the audience to step up their educational efforts and confront challenges bravely as civil rights activists in the 1960s did.

Some other activist groups were present outside the meeting hall. Some were distributing literature against nuclear power. The Committee to Ban Fracking in Michigan was there distributing brochures and signing up volunteers to collect signatures for such a ban. Any activists present must have felt invigorated by the last two speakers, Waskow and Steingraber, who encouraged their efforts. Chappell also spoke positively about the movement but then wandered off into academic dreamland. This shows the theoretical weakness of the movement as it tries to orient itself towards other issues and its basic class orientation. Hayden’s speech shows the political disarray of the movement: if it gets itself tied to the apron strings of Democratic Party politicians, it’s doomed.

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**Not just New Orleans — many coastal cities may drown**

James Hansen says sea levels could rise faster than expected

by Pete Brown, *Detroit Workers’ Voice*

From *DWV* list for August 27, 2015

James Hansen recently came out with a new prediction on global warming. This warning should be heeded by everyone looking to this December’s summit meeting on global warming (to be held in Paris). Hansen issued his warning along with a group of 16 other scientists who have been working on global warming for years and are concerned about seeing the Paris summit take urgently needed decisions.

Who is James Hansen? Formerly chief [climate] scientist at NASA, Hansen left his post there in 2013 to become a full-time climate activist. Hansen has courageously campaigned on the issue of global warming for years. In 1981, Hansen and a team of other NASA scientists published an article in the magazine *Science* warning of increasing CO2. They said: “Potential effects on climate in the 21st century include the creation of drought-prone regions in North America and central Asia ..., erosion of the West Antarctic ice sheet with a consequent worldwide rise in sea level, and opening of the fabled Northwest Passage.” All this has come true. We get a preview of things to come when we see drought in California and the burning of forests in Washington state. Pine forests throughout the West are being eaten up by beetles that thrive in drought, and lack of snow in the Rockies is causing a drop in Colorado River water, threatening water supplies for Las Vegas and other Southwestern cities. Much of the West’s water problems are caused by excessive use and natural wet-dry climate cycles, but the problems are exacerbated by global warming. Last year was the warmest year on record and last month the hottest month ever.

Hansen and fellow scientists, in their new declaration, do not waste time debating whether human society is impacting global warming. They simply say humans began contributing to climate change 1,000 years ago, and human impact is intensifying today because of the 20th century’s explosive growth of fossil fuel use. The question is not whether our carbon-hungry society is causing climate change, but how disastrous will it be, how much time do we have, and what can we do to adjust to its effects? They argue at length, “There is no morally defensible excuse to delay phase-out of fossil fuel emissions as rapidly as possible.”

Continued production of fossil fuels is “morally indefensible”. Why? Because the results could well involve a rise in sea levels so substantial that the world’s coastal cities would all have to be abandoned. As Team Hansen says, “If greenhouse gas emissions grow at a rate that continues ..., multi-meter sea level rise would become practically unavoidable.” But a rise of that size would mean cities like New York, Miami and Los Angeles would be largely under water. Some of their buildings would still stick up above water level, but one-story houses would be flooded, streets impossible to travel on (unless you were in a boat), and subways gone. Coastal cities would look like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (and New Orleans would be destroyed). Tens of millions of people would have to move farther inland, losing their jobs and livelihood while the nation loses its ports. The financial cost would be reckoned in trillions at least. And this is just the U.S.; coastal cities of China, India, Bangladesh, etc. would suffer a similar fate. Team Hansen sums it up: “Social
disruption and economic consequences of such large sea level rise could be devastating. It is not difficult to imagine that conflicts arising from forced migrations and economic collapse might make the planet ungovernable, threatening the fabric of civilization.”

Hansen’s paper emphasizes new discoveries about the melting of ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland. New evidence of a feedback loop in the ocean shows that cool fresh water from melting glaciers forces warm salty sea water underneath the ice sheets, speeding up their melting rate. The result is the ice sheets melt ten times faster than previous consensus estimates. This is not just theory; numerous observations in the past 18 months indicate this is fact. Hansen is critical of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) for trying to take a moderate, consensus view of global warming that allowed every world leader to agree to something minimal instead of boldly stating the hard facts. The IPCC itself had said that greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced by at least 70% by the year 2050; yet despite their world climate summit meetings little if any progress has been made in reaching that goal. The melting of ice sheets means that sea level rise will be sped up by at least a century, and this makes emergency action necessary.

We cannot wait for world leaders to give up their fossil fuels and agree to a gradual transition to renewables that would take centuries. And we cannot wait for the effects of a new tax on carbon to kick in; this market-oriented measure would take decades at least to affect carbon use and in the meantime would alienate the poor and working class people whose support for the transition is essential. Many environmentalists including Hansen himself have advocated the carbon tax as a way to make the transition, but this means relying on the market to (maybe) bring about change. This is too slow and too unsure; the only thing guaranteed is that masses of ordinary people will get fed up with environmentalism and its costs. Instead of making ordinary people pay for the transition by way of higher taxes, we should make the polluters pay. What’s needed are massive restrictions on fossil fuel use. This will at the same time require massive investments in infrastructure – insulating buildings, new kinds of power plants, new kinds of transportation like electric cars and high-speed trains, etc. This will generate lots of new jobs, but we cannot allow it to become a boondoggle that profiteers get rich off of. Working class people must be brought into supervision of the transition, and this means mobilizing them to support environmentalist goals.

Government leaders in the U.S. are dillydallying around, trying to avoid the hard questions while their friends in the oil and gas industry make their millions up to the last minute as coastal cities sink under water. Obama’s “all of the above” energy plan embraces dirty energy like fracked oil and gas and even – unbelievably, after Fukushima — promotes nuclear power. Obama is trying to walk a line promulgating a few new regulations while continuing to embrace oil and gas and free-market fundamentalism. This won’t work. The greed of the frackers and profiteers won’t be satisfied until they’ve squeezed every last ounce of profit out of the old dirty technology, and if a few million people starve to death or drown or perish from a lack of clean drinking water, they won’t care. Already rich people in Florida are building private islands to shield themselves against the deluge they know is coming. But what happens to the poor? It’s as if Noah had guards around his ark demanding $10 million admission.

Since the politicians in charge, Republican and Democrat, are captured and beholden to fossil fuel interests, the big changes necessary to make the transition to renewable energy won’t be coming from them. Even lots of mainstream environmentalist organizations are eager to make deals with the energy companies, endorse their pathetic “green” programs, and support futile market-oriented measures that will take effect, if at all, in decades. We don’t have decades. A two-degree (Centigrade) rise in temperature is already unavoidable; the IPCC had said it would be unsafe to go beyond this, but that is now inevitable at a minimum. James Hansen warned in 2008 that we should not go above 350 PPM of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, else we ran the risk of tripping dangerous tipping points for climate change. Today that 350 mark is long gone; we’re at 400 PPM and still rising. The time to start experimenting with new forms of energy was decades ago. But instead of helping develop new kinds of wind machines and solar cells the fossil fuel companies were sitting on their fat profits and fighting wars to monopolize oil. Even today, after BP’s blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, their “solution” is to drill the Arctic while fracking more oil and gas.

Ordinary people, workers and students and scientists, are actively protesting contamination of the earth while urging transition to a non-carbon economy. People are blockading coal trains, protesting new pipelines and leakages from old ones, demonstrating against nuclear power plants, surrounding ships going to drill the Arctic, and – yes – fighting against fracking. We need to help build such a movement and to bring forward the class issues to generate solutions to global warming.

(Pete Brown is active with the petition to ban fracking in Michigan)
Indonesia burns, and the promotion of biofuels is part of the problem

For decades now, during the dry season each year a haze has spread over Southeast Asia due mainly to the burning of forests in Indonesia. The article below was written during the fire season of 2015.

The ongoing eco-apocalypse in Indonesia, and the market measures that fan the flames

By Joseph Green
From the DWV list for November 2, 2015

Thousands upon thousands of fires are burning in the rain forests of Indonesia. Some sources say 100,000 fires are raging over vast expanses of the country. As result, “half a million people have suffered acute respiratory infections and 43 millions have been exposed to smoke. Several provinces have already declared emergencies, and Indonesia is considering declaring a national state of emergency to deploy resources to fight the fighters.”

The fires are a regional disaster, causing a haze of smog affecting not just Indonesia, but a number of other countries in Southeast Asia: Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Philippines. The fires are not just a regional disaster, but a global disaster, releasing fantastic amounts of carbon dioxide. On some days, the fires emit as much carbon dioxide each day as the entire US economy does in the same period.

What horrible natural disaster started these fires? None at all. They were deliberately set. The aim is to clear away the forests to provide room for palm oil plantations and other uses. Year after year, these fires are set. This year climactic conditions have led to a monster smog, but this is hardly the first time it has occurred. The Southeast Asian haze of 1997 was particularly bad and attracted world attention. And now, despite all the yearly conferences about global warming, another killer haze is back.

A couple of days ago the journalist and environmentalist George Monbiot wrote an article: “Indonesia is burning. So why is the world looking away?” Monbiot says this is an eco-apocalypse, and asks why there isn’t more attention to it.

But it and other articles leave out an important aspect of the problem. It’s that this disaster is, in part, a result of the market measures that the bourgeoisie is still clinging to. This disaster, in fact, was in part prepared by the cap and trade system set up under the Kyoto Protocol. It is surreal, but this eco-apocalypse has been created, in part, by the measures that the neo-liberal bourgeoisie claims will solve the global warming problem. It used to be said that, “if you aren’t part of the solution, you must be part of the problem”. It turns out that if you’re part of the solution, then you’re still part of the problem – if it’s the solution advocated by the neo-liberals.

The Kyoto Protocol on global warming marked a shift from the more successful Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion; it marked the emphatic endorsement of market measures and carbon pricing as the way to supposedly obtain environmental goals.

Now, the drastic cutback of carbon emissions would require a much greater change in the economy than the cutback in CFCs required under Montreal Protocol. It was no longer a question of a single sector of the economy, but of the economy of the whole. The Kyoto Protocol, however, avoided the idea of planning production so as to drastically cut carbon emissions, and instead relied on market measures, such as “cap and trade” and carbon credits, to achieve reductions. It relied on the corporations and the millionaire executives to decide what was best, if guided by market signals and desire for profit. What was the result?

With regard to palm oil, the logic of these measures was that palm oil is a renewable resource, and hence one should shift to using it. Under the market system, one doesn’t look into how the palm oil is produced, and that having palm oil plantations replace peat swamp forests is an environmental disaster of the worst sort. Under the market system, it’s not the buyer’s responsibility how the palm oil was produced and how that affected the environment; the buyer is responsible only for whether palm oil is theoretically a renewable resource – only for the physical content of the palm oil.

History showed that the Kyoto Protocol and the EU Emissions Trading System contributed to the growth of the palm oil market and the continuing devastation of the Indonesian rain forests. They poured gasoline on the yearly fires in Indonesia, and they helped pave the way for similar catastrophes elsewhere. Indeed, scientists have been worrying

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3) Brad Plumer, October 30, 2015, “How Indonesia’s fires became one of the world’s biggest climate disasters”, http://www.vox.com/2015/10/30/9645448/indonesia-fires-peat-palm-oil.


for some time about the possibility of gigantic run-away fires that would threaten the complete collapse of the Amazon forest.

And if the Kyoto Protocol had used a carbon tax instead of cap and trade, the result would have been the same: the carbon tax would have encouraged the use of palm oil and the creation of plantations in Indonesia to produce it. By way of contrast, the Montreal Protocol may have been far from perfect, and it must be strengthened, but it did limit the damage to atmospheric ozone.

Eventually, if I remember right, there was eventual recognition by the EU that there was a problem with palm oil, but for years the Kyoto Protocol contributed to the destruction of Indonesian rain forests. This is one example of a fiasco of establishment environmentalism; it is one reason why we need to build a working class wing of the environmental movement, a section opposed to neo-liberalism and its market measures. It is not sufficient to simply recognize the danger of global warming: there must also be a struggle for effective measures and against the absurdities of the neo-liberal measures being proposed as the solution.

The problem with palm oil plantations has been discussed for a long time. For example, seven years ago, in February 2008, I wrote about what’s going on in the Indonesian forests as follows:

The palm oil fiasco

Palm oil has become the most heavily used vegetable oil on the world market; in the last couple of years, world consumption of palm oil slightly exceeds even that of soybean oil. It is used both in food products and to make biodiesel; and as it has a high energy gain and a lot of palm oil can be obtained per acre of tropic forest, it might appear at first sight to be an excellent biofuel. Indeed, palm oil production is surging due in part to the increasing use of palm oil biodiesel in Malaysia, China, and the EU, while Indonesia sees the use of palm oil biodiesel as a way to cut down its imports of oil.

But the result is that large sections of the rainforests in Malaysia and Indonesia, two countries which supply over four-fifths of the world’s palm oil, are being burned and cleared. Of course, this isn’t only the result of palm oil, but also because of other cultivation and of logging. The capitalist market devastates the environment in a number of ways other than the fiascos of corporate environmentalism.

But there’s still worse. These forests are in large part peatlands, which contain vast amounts of dead organic matter which haven’t decomposed because the ground is too moist. They’re huge carbon sinks. But when the forests are cleared, the ground begins to dry out, and it emits spectacular amounts of carbon dioxide. Largely for this reason, Indonesia is the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases on the planet, exceeded only by the US and China. And biofuels plays its role in this: it is estimated that clearing peatlands to grow biofuels results in emitting thirty (yes, 30) times as much carbon dioxide as the use of these biofuels saves in replacing gasoline or diesel.

Yet importing palm oil from Indonesia is an acceptable way to achieve one’s obligations under Kyoto and the EU ETS. Thus the EU ETS and other carbon trading schemes have intensified the danger to the world’s forests; they end up encouraging the devastation of the environment. And this disaster is being brought to us in the name of curbing greenhouse gas emissions, while it actually increases those emissions. This is surreal; it would be a comedy if it weren’t also a historic tragedy whose consequences will be felt for years and years to come.6

For more on the need for the alternative to market measures and the need to build a militant working-class wing of the environmental movement, see the collection of articles at “The first market vs. the environment: Global warming, pollution, mass welfare, and the failure of market-based solutions”.7

6Joseph Green, February 2008, “Al Gore’s Nobel Peace Prize and the fiascos of corporate environmentalism”, http://www.communistvoice.org/41cAlGore.html. This article also has a section on the threatened destruction of the Amazon rainforest caused, in part, by the promotion of palm oil and sugar cane ethanol.
7http://www.communistvoice.org/00GlobalWarming.html.
Stop Shell from drilling in the Arctic!

Below are two articles from a leaflet by the Seattle Communist Study Group calling on people to take part in the May 18th day of action against Arctic drilling. In September, the Shell Oil Company announced that it was, for now, putting its Arctic drilling plans on hold.

Oil drilling in the pristine Chukchi Sea is a disaster in the making. Spills are almost certain, and even the partial “clean-ups” done in calmer, less isolated waters are impossible. Being driven by the bottom line, Shell has already had one major “accident,” the 2012 grounding of a drilling rig when trying to tow it out of Alaskan waters in stormy seas in order to avoid paying state taxes. There will be more such accidents, witness the Exxon Valdez in Alaska, BP’s gigantic Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and Shell’s own spills in Nigeria and elsewhere. Moreover, this same rule of the bottom line is driving all the fossil fuel extractors to continually expand operations no matter what the burning of their product does to the earth and its people.

Global warming, an earth emergency

The rising carbon dioxide level in the earth’s atmosphere is now at the highest level in 2 million years. This is being caused by the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas, and by deforestation. As well, another major greenhouse gas, methane, is continually being released into the atmosphere by fracking and deforestation. The result is serious global warming, with the first three months of 2015 being the hottest on record.

No help from the world’s governments . . .

It has been a quarter century since the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) first pointed out that global warming had already begun, and 17 years since adoption of the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But the market “solutions” adopted by a large number of countries – cap and trade with carbon offsets, etc. – have failed miserably. They’ve also resulted in fiascoes like the release of previously trapped methane into the atmosphere when polluters finance destruction of rainforests in order to plant palm oil plantations so they can be rewarded with with carbon offsets. This is the sorry result of market-worshiping, neo-liberal avoidance of environmental regulations and planning, which must be extended to overall economic planning.

. . . or from the Republicans and Democrats

The Republicans in large part remain stuck in denying that human activity has anything to do with global warming and climate change. On the other hand, the Democrats can talk a good environmental fight, but their proposals and actions betray their words. Al Gore, for example, has done much to expose the dangers of climate change and even attacked the polluting corporations as “merchants of poison”. But the actions he advocates – the already-failed “cap and trade,” working hand-in-hand with the corporations and giving them subsidies, pricing carbon, etc. – are no fight at all. Meanwhile our “green president,” Obama, boasts in his state of the union speeches about how the U.S. has become “energy independent” through more oil drilling and shale fracking. Moreover, Obama has opened the Eastern Seaboard to offshore oil and gas exploration for the first time in decades, and has opened more of the Arctic. As well, it is no less than Obama who has “fast-tracked” Shell’s efforts to drill exploratory wells in the Chukchi Sea.

What about establishment environmentalism?

It’s stuck searching for other market measures with which to replace the failures, with the carbon tax being a current favorite. But the carbon tax will also fail to achieve the necessary reductions in the use of carbon fuels. More, it is a regressive tax that threatens to undermine mass support for environmentalism. Establishment environmentalism also continues to look for saviors from the Democratic Party. Its entire outlook must be broken with and opposed.

The need for an environmental program

The struggle to stop Shell from using Seattle’s Terminal 5 as home port for its Arctic drilling fleet takes place while struggles to stop fracking, coal and oil trains and pipelines rage everywhere. And this is in midst of an overall movement demanding that coal, oil and gas be left in the ground. So this immediately raises the issue of the movement needing a positive program to draw workers into motion who presently feel they’re under attack by environmentalism.

Switch to renewables, yes, but don’t rely on the market. Leaving fossil fuels in the ground means large numbers of mining, oil, transport, and other workers will be thrown into unemployment, and the market “solution” for that is they should walk the streets until they find another job, any job at any miserable wage, if they can.

The environmental movement must say NO to this. There must be a plan for reemploying these workers in other industries at good wages, and this must be part of overall environmental and economic planning. Indeed, replacing use of fossil fuels with renewable energy sources is not only going to require government investments in new infrastructure, but also lots of economic planning as well as regulations. Additionally, there are many other environmental issues that must be dealt with.

Governments are going to begin regulating and planning as the environmental crisis becomes even more devastating, and we should demand this be done now. But if this takes place in the normal way the interests of the masses of people will
continually be sacrificed to the prerogatives of capital, including those of the polluters themselves. Thus there is going to have to be a huge fight demanding that the masses of people be involved in formulation of regulations and in planning. Such a fight will inevitably come.

Millions upon millions of everyday working people are deeply concerned about the future of the planet. Through victories and defeats, many of them have long participated in environmental actions all over this country and world. Today they look upon mega-corporation Shell’s plans to drill in the Arctic with justified hatred. We join them in shouting...

Shell No!

Join the day of action: Monday, May 18, 2015 7:00 a.m., Duwamish Channel Fishing Dock (Spokane Street Bridge) (PDF at www.communistvoice.org/Sea150515.pdf)

On the California drought and water restrictions

The four-year-old drought gripping much of the Southwest and West is a warning of things to come in much of the country and world. Reservoirs are near empty, aquifers are being depleted and there is no snow pack. Hence the need to restrict water usage. But after closed-door meetings with the captains of industry and agriculture, the restrictions ordered by Democratic California Governor Brown are a scandalous outrage: the people are ordered to cut back water use by 25% while there are few or no restrictions for industry and agriculture even though they account for some 82% of the state’s annual water consumption.

Watering most food crops is obviously necessary, but what about almonds? It takes over a gallon of water to grow a single almond, and almond trees soak up about 10 percent of California’s total water supply each year. But growing almonds is profitable for the capitalists, so much so that they’ve expanded production by 70,000 acres since this drought began. To defend those profits Gov. Brown lets them off the hook.

And while burning fossil fuels is going to cause even worse droughts than the present, Brown — without batting an eye — lets the oil-drilling and fracking companies off the hook too!

Against nuclear waste, Arctic drilling, and tar sands oil

Environmental protests

by Pete Brown, Detroit Workers’ Voice

From the DWV list for September 3, 2015

Every day there are protests against attacks on the environment. Be it Fukushima or Deep Water Horizon or the latest frack well, ordinary people are constantly taking up struggle against assaults on the environment. Some of the most recent protests:

against nuclear waste

On Sunday, August 16th, 200 people demonstrated in Port Huron against plans to build a new nuclear waste dump near there. Ontario Power Generation, the electric company on the Canadian side of the border, plans to bury seven million tons of radioactive waste just a half mile from Lake Huron. Protesters wore anti-nuke T-shirts, carried signs saying “Dump the Dump”, and gathered signatures on a petition to the Canadian Minister of Environment.

The nuclear waste comes from OPG’s power plant at Kincardine, Ontario. OPG argues the waste would be stored thousands of feet down, below groundwater, and would be sealed in rocky leakproof caverns. But commonsense tells us everything leaks eventually; that’s what keeps city water workers busy. And with fracking and its earthquakes becoming more common, who is to say the earth won’t move and open cracks in this allegedly leakproof cavern? The waste will remain radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years, when OPG is long gone but there are still (hopefully) people living around the Great Lakes. OPG is giving empty promises, and they know it, when they assure people the waste will be completely safe forever.

Another problem is transporting the waste to the dump site. Traveling by rail, there is always the chance of a major
accident which would spread radioactivity around western Ontario and the Lake Huron watershed.

The waste is presently stored above ground at the Kincardine plant, and it's true that it's not completely safe there either. The Fukushima disaster made this abundantly clear. The Kincardine plant is right on the shore of Lake Huron, so a disaster at that plant would ruin the Great Lakes. But is the solution then to bury its waste underground near the Great Lakes? There doesn't seem to be any good solution to the problem of nuclear waste, which is one of the major arguments against nuclear power. As one of the protesters said, “If we just stopped using nuclear materials, then we wouldn't have to find some place to put it when done.”

President Obama and other establishment politicians are trying to find a way to bring back nuclear power, to make it acceptable to a wider public again after numerous disasters. But this demonstration, and previous ones at the Monroe power plant by Michigan and Ohio activists, as well as the ongoing demonstrations in Japan concerning Fukushima, show they have a long way to go.

against drilling the Arctic

On August 31st some 50-60 people in Seattle marched in solidarity with the larger protests in Anchorage, Alaska protesting President Obama’s visit there. Activists demanded urgent action on climate change and attacked President Obama’s hypocrisy on environmental issues. Most of the activists were from the Shell No! Action Council and other environmental organizations. Activists denounced Obama and his Secretary of Interior, Sally Jewell (who is from Seattle), for approving Shell Oil’s plan to drill for oil in the Arctic.

President Obama made headlines during his visit to Alaska by speaking against climate deniers who try to stop any action on climate change by arguing the science isn’t definite yet. Obama rightly denounced them but did so in an apologetic way, calling them stupid and backward. This covers over the real political connections of the climate deniers and the reason they persist in stupid campaigns. In fact the climate deniers are well funded by conservative think tanks like the Heartland Institute, the Ripon Society, and the Institute for Energy Research, which are themselves funded by the Koch brothers and corporations that get rich off of carbon-intensive energy. Alpha Natural Resources, for instance, a coal company, recently went bankrupt, and its financial records show big-money contributions to climate denier groups and shady think tanks that prop up the conservative Republican Party. Alpha is the company that took over Massey Energy after 29 miners were killed in a Massey mine, and Massey had to get out from under lawsuits.

The climate deniers are stupid like a fox. They know where their profits are coming from, and they don’t care if it ruins the environment. President Obama certainly knows this, so why doesn’t he say so? Because he and his party, the Democrats, are also well financed by the rich carbon-hungry energy corporations and their top executives and shareholders. This is proved by the Obama administration giving the green light to Shell Oil to drill for oil in the Arctic.

Activists are correct to denounce Obama’s hypocrisy, but when hypocrisy goes on for years, on many issues, it ceases to be a personal failing and becomes government policy. Actions speak louder than words, and the Obama administration’s actions are in support of the “stupid” energy billionaires.

against tar sands oil

On August 25th some 100 young activists, most of them from Midwest Unrest, occupied the sidewalk in front of John Kerry’s home in Georgetown (in Washington, D.C.) protesting the State Dept.’s approval of an increase in tar sands oil going through the Alberta Clipper pipeline. The activists swarmed over Kerry’s front stoop and sidewalk holding signs denouncing Kerry’s shady deal for more tar sands oil. They linked arms, sang songs and held a large sign saying “Kerry: Stop Enbridge’s Illegal Tar Sands Scheme.” The activists included representatives from a number of Native American tribes and different Native organizations. The Obama administration and its State Dept. have turned a deaf ear to the tribes’ complaints about the tar sands project, and finally, after Kerry approved the deal, they traveled to Washington to bring the protest to Kerry’s front door.

The Alberta Clipper pipeline, owned by Enbridge Oil, brings tar sands oil from Alberta, Canada through North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin. It currently sends 440,000 barrels of oil per day through; under the new plan pressure on the pipeline will be increased so it can send almost double that amount. The proposed increase equals the entire output of the proposed Keystone XL project, which is currently under environmental review. But the Alberta Clipper will be doing it without any environmental review; all it needed was Kerry’s signature. This is clearly an attempt by the Obama administration to circumvent the controversy surrounding Keystone and bring in more tar sands oil through a backroom deal.

Tar sands oil is much heavier than regular oil, so increasing the pressure on an old pipeline could well spell disaster, especially in the hands of Enbridge Oil which is notorious for oil spills like the 2010 spill near Kalamazoo that polluted the river there. The young activists showed initiative in finding a new way to bring the issue directly to Kerry’s doorstep.

Activists in Port Huron, Anchorage, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. are on the move exposing different assaults on the environment. They should also expose the corporate connections behind these assaults and their ties to the two major political parties, Republican and Democrat. Obama and his cabinet members will never do that, no matter how many nice-sounding speeches they give. What’s needed is a real trend of conscious struggle against the polluters.
Detroit demo against frack waste

by Pete Brown, Detroit Workers' Voice
From the DWV list for October 7, 2015

On October 3 I attended a demonstration in Detroit against the expansion of a waste processing plant there. The plant belongs to a company called U.S. Ecology on the near east side of Detroit near Hamtramck. This company has applied to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) for a permit to expand its processing of waste by ten times. This includes processing frack waste from other states. The company plans to solidify this waste somehow and then send the solid waste material to Idaho. The liquid leftovers will then be dumped into the Detroit water and sewage system. This watery material will include chemicals left over from frack waste called "flowback" that includes chemical contaminants used in fracking as well as radioactive minerals dislodged by the fracking process.

Detroiter are angry about the company's plan to use the Detroit water system to get rid of frack waste. This practice has been banned in Pennsylvania, where the fracking companies have millions of gallons of frack waste to dispose of. The Oct. 3 protest was called to stimulate public comments to MDEQ to deny U.S. Ecology's request for a permit.

Some 40 or more people gathered outside the plant on a windy, wet and cold Saturday morning to protest the company's plans. Slogans were shouted loudly and vigorously: "Hey hey, ho ho, frack waste has got to go" was one of the most popular, as well as "What do we want? Deny the permit! When do we want it? Now!" (Some people shouted "Yesterday!"") Picketers carried signs with slogans like "Ban Frack Waste" and "Keep Radioactivity Out of Detroit". A couple groups also had large banners. Participants included people from around metro Detroit and even farther.

After marching and shouting for awhile, protesters listened to short speeches from the demonstration's organizers, endorsers and supporters. LuAnne of the Committee to Ban Fracking talked about the petition campaign to ban fracking and about how to pressure MDEQ to deny the company's permit. A speaker from Metro Detroiter for Bernie talked about being shocked to see the level of destruction in that neighborhood and how important it was to oppose further devastation and environmental racism. Fred of Detroit Workers' Voice talked about how the politicians and big organizations weren't there, but despite the demonstrators' small numbers they would make a big difference, just as it was rank-and-file auto workers who got together to defeat the contract agreement that the UAW and Fiat/Chrysler tried to impose on them. [Rank-and-file workers defeated the first tentative contract, but the second version, which wasn't that much better, passed. See pp. 30-34. –CF] Elena from the Detroit School Board talked about the connection between environmental racism and the destruction of education in Detroit, as the state has imposed a financial manager on the Detroit school system who is denying equal education to inner-city children. She said the school board has gone on record opposing U.S. Ecology's plan to expand, but the state's financial manager doesn't care. She noted that, while Republican legislators have been leading the destruction of Detroit public schools, Democratic Party politicians have also done nothing to oppose it.

A number of people spoke about the technical side of things. One speaker explained that, while alpha-ray radiation might seem very weak, as it can be blocked with a sheet of paper, it could wreak havoc inside a human body if [materials radiating it were] ingested, and it's very hard to detect when transported because container walls block it. Also, the level of radioactivity in hazardous waste may be reduced to legal levels of intensity without reducing its harmfulness by mixing it with non-radioactive waste. So alpha-ray radiation in frack waste could turn out to be very dangerous even while passing tests for its presence.

A couple people from local block clubs spoke about their efforts to protect parks and the local environment. They noted that in talks with neighbors they found a good response, and most people are very concerned about the company's expansion plans.

A number of people I spoke with talked about the water crisis in Flint, where the state financial manager said he would save money by getting water directly from the Flint River. The result: children in Flint now show high levels of lead in blood tests, and the state must now overspend to try and recover from this catastrophe. An interesting lesson from this disaster is the way bureaucrats involved tried to cover up and lie about it. In months past water tests and tests for lead in children were performed by technicians from Virginia Tech and from the Hurley Children's Hospital in Flint. When asked about it, Brad Wurfel, spokesman for MDEQ, blew off the test results as hysteria-mongering and tried to assure the public there was nothing to worry about. Finally, two weeks ago, the Genesee County Health Dept. issued its own report and declared a state of emergency in Flint. At that point the state finally admitted the truth and said it would rush clean water and filters to Flint. But the children there still show high levels of lead in their blood, with results that may take decades to manifest. Some local media are demanding that MDEQ, supposedly the regulator of water quality, should itself be regulated by the federal EPA.

It was great to see Detroiter active on these issues, exchanging information and ideas and acting without endorsement of the big national environmental organizations or politicians. The demonstration got some advance publicity in Detroit newspapers, but no big organizations went all out to mobilize for it, and it was left to a handful of concerned activists to do so in a short two-week period. One state rep sent her best wishes, but aside from her no one in the political establishment dared oppose the company's plans. But pressure from below is building, and MDEQ has now been forced to extend its period of public comment before issuing its ruling. Most importantly, activists have begun making connections and building organization.
Against the stepped-up intervention of Russian imperialism in the Syrian civil war

Support the Syrian people against the Assad dictatorship!

By Joseph Green
From the DWV list for October 21, 2015

In the last month the Russian government has dramatically stepped up its involvement in Syria. Russia is reinforcing the long-time Russian naval base in Tartus, the second-largest port city in Syria; and it is setting up an air base near Latakia in western Syria. Russian planes have carried out air strikes, while Russian ships have fired cruise missiles into Syria. Russia has also stepped up its supply of heavy equipment and troops to the Assad dictatorship, with Russian tanks, helicopter gunships, and “volunteers” playing an increasing part in the war.

The Russian government says it is targeting only the murderous ISIS fundamentalists. But Vladimir Putin regards just about all the opposition to the Assad dictatorship as terrorists and fundamentalists. Most of Russian air strikes are aimed at the forces which are opposed to both Assad and ISIS. Indeed, the stepped-up Russian intervention in Syria has allowed the Assad regime to go on the offensive against the anti-dictatorship forces.

Syria has lived under the dictatorship of first Hafez al-Assad and then his son Bashar al-Assad for nearly half a century. Independent political activity was squashed; unions and other associations had to be directed by the Ba’ath Party; and opposition was brutally suppressed. But for five years now the Syrian people have been involved in a determined struggle against the Assad dictatorship. They began this struggle with peaceful demonstrations in 2011, but were forced into civil war by the bloody retaliation of the Assad regime against any form of protest. The rebellion spread rapidly throughout both cities and countryside, and some liberated villages held the first democratic elections that people could remember. But Bashar al-Assad has managed to cling to power with the help of heavy weaponry and the slaughter of civilians in rebel areas. The regime has used “barrel bombs”, poison gas, the targeting of medical facilities, and the torture of opponents to terrorize the Syrian masses. This has resulted in over a quarter of a million dead in a country of under 23 million, and in half the population of Syria being forced to abandon their homes, either being displaced within Syria or seeking safety in neighboring countries or even Europe.

Nevertheless the civil war would have ended long ago with the collapse of the Assad regime except for massive support for Assad from outside. Money, military equipment, and troops have reinforced Assad from Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, and elsewhere.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and various other Arab regimes have provided some aid to some of the forces against Assad. But they have sought to undermine the democratic opposition and promote fundamentalist forces. For its part, the US government has tried to ensure that whatever military aid it sends is only used to fight ISIS, and isn’t used against the Assad regime. Moreover, at this point, the US government is tacitly coordinating air strikes with the Assad regime, and seeking to settle Syrian affairs with an international agreement for a transitional government that would preserve the basic structure of the Assad regime intact. Meanwhile the extreme reactionaries of ISIS have sought to conquer everyone else and set up their own fundamentalist hell.

All this has created a complicated and difficult situation, with many different forces intervening, including fundamentalists fighting both for and against Assad, and with the democratic movement in Syria facing a struggle against both Assad’s Ba’ath regime and ISIS.

Despite this, the mass opposition to dictatorship continues. The stepped-up Russian intervention has seriously threatened the Syrian masses. But having obtained a number of anti-tank missiles, the opposition has inflicted heavy casualties on the Assad forces in several recent battles. It has accomplished this despite its lack of anti-aircraft weapons to defend itself against Assad’s air force and the Russian planes. In the Syrian civil war, most of the people are on one side, while most of the heavy weapons are on the other.

It has been claimed over and over again that the democratic forces opposed to Assad have been reduced to insignificance. President Obama, the man with ties to Wall Street, famously denigrated the Syrian resistance as ineffective because they were just “former farmers or teachers or pharmacists”. (News conference of June 19, 2014) Yet the common people of Syria have continued the struggle against the Syrian dictatorship for year after year; they have held out against tanks and aircraft. And Russia’s stepped-up intervention seems to have been prompted by fear of an imminent fall of its long-time friend, the Assad government.

It is important for workers’ movements and progressive activists around the world to support the democratic struggle in Syria. All the outside countries intervening in Syria are capitalist and imperialist powers: none of them are friends of the masses, even if some outside powers for their own purposes provide some weapons to the anti-Assad forces.

None of them — neither Russian imperialism nor Western imperialism — has real sympathy for the farmers, teachers, pharmacists, and workers of Syria. It is up to the left-wing and progressive movements to support the common people of Syria, fighting dictatorship and fundamentalism.

But we find a disastrous situation on the left. Most of the American left, including many figures who have gained respect for past accomplishments, do not support the Syrian people. This is a infamous betrayal of internationalism and working class solidarity. Some of the left supports the bloody, dictatorial Assad regime as the best alternative in Syria, while others think that the Syrian civil war is only a proxy war between the outside powers, such as the US and Russia. In this
way, much of the left has become apologists for the Assad regime, some enthusiastically, others inadvertently.

The apologists of dictatorship seek to prove that opposition to the Assad dictatorship serves US imperialist interests. The irony is that US imperialism has the same contemptuous attitude to the mass struggle against Assad as do these would-be anti-imperialists. Obama wants to see, not the overthrow of Assad, but a transitional government. And just a few days ago, on Oct. 16, an article by one of the high priests of US imperialism, Henry Kissinger, appeared in the Wall Street Journal in which he looks towards a future Syria where “a context will exist for the role of Mr. Assad”. For that matter, Kissinger’s statement is nothing new. The US government no doubt fondly remembers how cooperative the Assad regime was in the “extraordinary rendition” and torture of the Canadian citizen Maher Arar and other victims.

This is not the first time that much of the left has sought to wash its hands of the democratic struggle. There are groups on the left that have been doing this for years. They have sought to prove that the movements against dictatorial or corrupt governments in country after country are really plots directed by US imperialism: it’s reminiscent of the segregationists in the American South claiming that the civil rights movement was a creation of outsiders, or UAW President Williams claiming that auto workers opposed to two-tier wage systems and inhuman work schedules are just victims of “outside agitators” (“UAW’s Williams calls out outside agitators, says more info coming on FCA talks”, October 5, 2015, Automotive News)

The failure to support the struggle against the Syrian dictatorship shows the deep and serious nature of the crisis in the left. It is an example of why we have devoted so much time and effort to dealing with this ideological and theoretical crisis; it’s an example of why it’s important to distinguish real Marxism from the corrupted Marxism and fake anti-imperialism that is so widespread. The problem isn’t just that the left-wing movements don’t have sufficient strength. But instead we see that most of the present leadership of the American left has illusions in reactionary regimes such as imperialist Russia or theocratic Iran. We also see that many left organizations don’t have the faintest idea of what US imperialist policy in Syria really is. To provide solidarity with the Syrian masses and truly oppose imperialism, we need to see what’s really going on in Syria. And we also need to repudiate the backward theories that have led so much of the American left to refuse this solidarity.

In further articles in the coming weeks I hope to deal with some of the following issues [they will appear later]:

- what is US imperialist policy in Syria;
- which forces in the Syrian crisis are coordinating with the apartheid government of Israel;
- what the Syrian struggle and the fate of the Arab Spring tell us about the nature of democratic struggles at the present time;
- what is real anti-imperialism, and what is non-class anti-imperialism (anti-imperialism without or even against the people);
- what is the nature of the Russian and Iranian regimes;
- and what is the relation of the Kurdish struggle to the struggle against Assad.

Syrian masses continue to struggle against Assad tyranny

Refugee crisis deepens into famine

From Detroit Workers’ Voice #119, Jan. 18, 2016

The struggle of the Syrian people against the tyrannical Assad regime continues.

The Syrian Arab masses are fighting a bitter armed struggle against the Assad tyranny. The Syrian Kurds, with support of some of the Arab rebels, have been battling successfully against the beastly ISIS jihadists.

The people in the Arab areas are being deluged with bombing from the regime's air force, now coordinated with massive bombing from the Russian imperialist air force. The bombing is destroying some rebel strongholds of the Free Syrian Army. Bombs are generating ever more refugees, while the regime's blockade of some areas has created bitter famine and people are starving to death in the town of Madaya. And the Kurds are under continuous assault from ISIS.

This mayhem is the result of the contention of the big imperialist powers, the U.S. and Russia, and the local tyrants of the Assad regime, the ISIS medieval jihadi regime, the Saudi executioners and the Turkish bourgeois government as well, over control of the area. In addition, Assad has received military assistance from the large pro-Iranian Hezbollah army from Lebanon.

The Russians entered the war in September, claiming to fight ISIS, but most of their carnage has been inflicted on rebel civilian populations. U.S. imperialism continues its bombing, claiming to target ISIS but also hitting civilian targets.

All these powers, like vampires, sometimes in conflict and sometimes allied, are pitted against the people. They are like a mafia, with different factions, but all dedicated criminals. Yet the people fight on.

But some of the left around the world has refused to support the embattled Syrian people. Instead these people have mostly supported the Assad regime, a regime that murders and tortures its own people, collaborates with the big imperialists and even ran torture houses for U.S. imperialism after 911. The failure to support the Syrian people is a big mistake.

One excuse given for non-support is that the Syrian fighters accepted weapons from the U.S. and were somehow pawns of the CIA. But an oppressed people has a right to get its weapons from anywhere. And seriously effective arms, such as anti-aircraft missiles which could have destroyed Assad’s air force and probably would have led to his downfall – these have never been delivered to the Syrian fighters.
The Syrian masses have refused control by the U.S. When the U.S. tried to set up a group controlled by it, few Syrians joined and it collapsed.

Another excuse for non-support, equally lame, is that the Assad regime has some conflicts with the U.S. This supposedly makes it an anti-imperialist regime. But this is not genuine anti-imperialism; it does not benefit the masses. The Assad regime has drowned non-violent demonstrations in blood and systematically tortured rebels. It has relinquished all right to support. Genuine anti-imperialism starts with supporting the working people of each country against all their oppressors.

The imperialist powers, through the U.N., have called a peace conference for January 25. Their goal is to get the fighters to lay down their arms short of victory. They want to preserve the bloodstained Assad tyranny. But so far, the fighting organizations refuse to accept any continuation of the Assad regime.

Support the fighting Syrian people against the Assad regime, ISIS, Russian imperialist attacks and U.S. imperialist manipulation!

Marxism and democracy

Those leftists who wash their hands of the struggle against the Assad dictatorship often denigrate the importance of the struggle for democratic rights. The non-class anti-imperialists care more about which imperialist power Assad was closer to—Russia or the U.S.—then whether he oppressed the Syrian masses; they believe in an anti-imperialism without the working class of Syria.

This led recently to an exchange on Louis Proyect’s Marxism mailing list in which the “left communist” Luko Willms claimed that Frederick Engels shared his disdain for elections. But looking at the very article by Engels cited by Willms, one can see that Engels saw a great value in the struggle for universal suffrage and democratic government.

Willms argued that the Syrian uprising wasn’t a revolutionary movement, and Engels didn’t care about struggles for democratic government anyway. Willms denigrated the Syrian struggle because it is faces difficult conditions, is not unified, and centers on democratic rights. Proyect argued that there was a Syrian revolution. I held that the democratic uprising in Syria is of vital importance, but it’s not a social revolution. (I wrote about uprisings that aren’t socialist movements in my article Leninism and the Arab Spring, www.communistvoice.org/46Leninism.html.) In reply to Willms, I showed that Engels backed democratic movements even though they weren’t socialist movements directed at overthrowing bourgeois rule.

> There are still many people in Syria who have politics that are revolutionary even if they don’t quote Karl Marx.

Also in Germany, Poland, the USA etc. And also here is no revolution taking place.

And if it were, there would be a unifying trend around one revolutionary leadership. Independent of any label you might want to attach to that leadership.

As said, in Syria the opposite development began in 2011, and is still continuing: an increasing fragmentation, a deepening splintering of the “opposition” into — according to your message — at least 50 factions, 51 if we include the country’s government. Probably much more. And each of them is the result of some “leadership” group forming a separate armed faction in order to exercise power over the people by their separate sectarian leadership clique.

That is not revolution, that is the destruction of any chance for revolution. A revolution in Syria would have to chase all those armed cliques away in the first place.

> Marx and Lenin fought for democratic rights

Sure, they were revolutionists. Lenin’s leadership is one such example of the unifying process of a real popular revolution, which was the opposite of what is happening in Syria right now.

> and even for the replacement of dictatorial rule by parliamentary democracy,

No, that is wrong. Engels even took great pains to explain to the German movement that the concrete democratic rights are indispensable, first and foremost the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly and the freedom of association, while parliamentary elections, even common and secret and equal elections are mostly a trap. I think that I mentioned not long ago this article, a veiled polemic against the Lassaleans in the article “The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers’ Party”, in english in the MIA at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1865/02/12.htm>

For example:

> If the government decreed universal direct suffrage, it would
from the outset hedge it about with so many if's and buts that it would in fact not be universal direct suffrage at all any more.

And regarding universal direct suffrage itself, one has only to go to France to realise what tame elections it can give rise to, if one has only a large and ignorant rural population, a well-organised bureaucracy, a well-regimented press, associations sufficiently kept down by the police and no political meetings at all. How many workers’ representatives does universal direct suffrage send to the French chamber, then? And yet the French proletariat has the advantage over the German of far greater concentration and longer experience of struggle and organisation.

I also don’t know of any place where Marx or Engels or Lenin talked about “dictatorial rule” as something to be replaced, and be it only a parliamentary democracy.

No, no, our comrades were very clear: we fight for material democratic rights, for the workers to take power out of the hands of the bourgeoisie.

**Project again, Nov. 15**

Lüko Willms wrote:

> ...parliamentary democracy,

> "No, that is wrong. Engels even took great pains to explain to the German movement that the concrete democratic rights are indispensable, first and foremost the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly and the freedom of association, while parliamentary elections, even common and secret and equal elections are mostly a trap.

No, this is totally wrong. Marx and Engels took part in the revolutionary movements of 1848 where there was little evidence of a socialist transformation. In fact many people understood the Arab Spring as having a lot in common with 1848:

http://socialistreview.org.uk/368/arab-1848

In 1848 popular revolutions swept across Europe. The lessons from these events can help us to understand the revolutions in the Middle East today.

The sheer scale of the Arab revolutions has sent commentators searching through the historical record to find parallels to help make sense of events and guess where they might lead. Repeatedly they turn to the revolutions that swept Europe in 1848. It’s not hard to see why.

Like 2011 in the Middle East, in early 1848 revolution appeared to move triumphantly from one capital city to the next. A revolt in Sicily was the signal for an uprising in Paris. Within three days the king had fled and a republic was declared. The flame of revolt then leapt to Berlin, Vienna, Budapest and Milan. Even the Pope was forced to flee as revolutionaries overwhelmed his Swiss Guard and declared Rome a republic. In total, almost 50 uprisings took place in the first four months of 1848.

The second parallel with 2011 is that the revolutions in 1848 began as democratic revolts against authoritarian regimes, aiming to establish political freedoms, elected parliaments and so on.

....

**Joseph Green, Nov. 16:**

Lüko Willms distinguishes between “concrete democratic rights” and universal suffrage, and insists that Engels makes the same distinction. This is an important issue, and I will show below that he is turning Engels on his head.

Lüko Willms wrote:

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I think that I mentioned not long ago this article, a veiled polemic against the Lassaleans in the article *The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers’ Party*

> For example:

> "If the government decreed universal direct suffrage, it would from the outset hedge it about with so many if's and buts that it would in fact not be universal direct suffrage at all any more."

But Willms takes the argument out of context. Engels is talking about a particular situation: 1860s Germany. Let’s look into this.

Engels distinguishes what might type of elections might be conceded by the bureaucratic-absolutist government of Bismarck representing “the feudal aristocracy and the bureaucracy” and elections under different conditions. In Germany in the 1860s, there was still the question of whether there would be a democratic revolution. Engels analyzes the concrete situation of that time, and distinguishes the type transformation Bismarck aimed at in order to stave off revolution, and the type transformation that would be of most use for the masses.

When one reads the entire article, one sees that Engels is fervently in favor of universal suffrage; it is absurd to say that Engels distinguished between concrete democratic rights, which were important, and universal suffrage, which was supposedly mainly a trap. If one wanted to condense and simplify Engels’ argument, it would be that universal suffrage can be a trap and an empty facade if there aren’t other democratic rights, but is extremely important when there are these other rights. This is exactly opposite to how Lüko Willms understands him.

Also, one will see that Engels was not afraid to champion the overthrow of bureaucratic-absolutist rule in favor of a democratic government, even in the situation that this government was bound to be a bourgeois government. That is relevant to various of the democratic movements today.

In the 1860s, the Bismarckian system of government could only have been overthrown if the bourgeois strata had supported this. The working class was faced with what its attitude to this should be. Engels calls the general democratic movement “the bourgeois movement”, to indicate the distinction from the socialist movement and because democracy in Germany at that
time would put the bourgeoisie into power, but he knew full well that not only capitalists were in that movement. The concrete circumstances facing the masses has changed since the 1860s. The class situation is more complicated. But the general principles put forward by Engels – of the distinction between the democratic and socialist movement, of the need for the proletariat to participate in the democratic struggle, and the need of the proletariat to have its own independent standpoint during this struggle – remain valid.

Now for the quotes:

Engels writes, as if to repudiate Luko Willms in advance,

“...the bourgeoisie and workers can only exercise real, organised, political power through parliamentary representation; and such parliamentary representation is valueless unless it has a voice and a share in making decisions, in other words, unless it holds the ‘purse-strings’. That however is precisely what Bismarck on his own admission is trying to prevent. We ask: is it in the interests of the workers that this parliament should be robbed of all power, this parliament which they themselves hope to enter by winning universal direct suffrage and in which they hope one day to form the majority? Is it in their interests to set all the wheels of agitation in motion in order to enter an assembly whose words ultimately carry no weight? Surely not.”

So much for Engels’ supposed denigration of the value of universal suffrage and parliamentary representation.

Luko Willms cites the following passage, but doesn’t consider that Engels isn’t referring to a French republic, but to the repressive Second Empire of Louis Bonaparte which existed at that time. Engels is not talking about what universal suffrage is in general, but about the Bonapartist parody of it.

>> And regarding universal direct suffrage itself, one has >>only to go to France to realise what tame elections it can >>give rise to, if one has only a large and ignorant rural >>population, a well-organised bureaucracy, a well- >>regimented press, associations sufficiently kept down by the >>police and no political meetings at all. How many workers’ >>representatives does universal direct suffrage send to the >>French chamber, then? And yet the French proletariat has >>the advantage over the German of far greater concentration >>and longer experience of struggle and organisation.

Here Engels refers to what universal direct suffrage might mean, “if one has only a large and ignorant rural population, a well-organised bureaucracy, a well-regimented press, associations sufficiently kept down by the police and no political meetings at all.” In other words, if Bismarck grants a universal suffrage while keeping the other conditions — and that’s all Bismarck will do — then it will be suffrage just like under the Second Empire and Louis Bonaparte in France.

Engels considered what would happen if the bourgeoisie did take political power from the Bismarckian regime. He wrote, in this same article,

“The bourgeoisie cannot win political power for itself nor give this political power constitutional and legal forms without at the same time putting weapons into the hands of the proletariat. ... To be consistent, it must therefore demand universal, direct suffrage, freedom of the press, association and assembly and the suspension of all special laws directed against individual classes of the population. And there is nothing else that the proletariat needs to demand from it. ... With freedom of the press and the right of assembly and association it will win universal suffrage, and with universal, direct suffrage, in conjunction with the above tools of agitation, it will win everything else.”

But what if the bourgeoisie wasn’t consistent (and in fact preferred to preserve the bureaucratic-absolutist government). In that case, Engels said, “there are two paths left to the workers”:

“Either to drive the bourgeoisie against its will and compel it as far as possible to extend the suffrage, to grant freedom of the press, association and assembly and thereby to create the arena for the proletariat in which it can move freely and organise. That is what the English workers have done since the Reform Bill of 1832 and the French workers since the July Revolution of 1830...”

The alternative, said Engels, would be to “withdraw entirely from the bourgeois movement and leave the bourgeoisie to its fate. This was what happened in England, France and Germany after the failure of the European workers’ movement form 1848 to 1850. It can only happen after violent and temporarily fruitless exertions, after which the class needs to rest. It cannot happen when the working class is in a healthy condition, for it would be the equivalent of total political abdication, and a class which is courageous by nature, a class which has nothing to lose and everything to gain, is incapable of that in the long term.”

But what if the bourgeoisie betrayed utterly (as in fact did happen). Well, Engels said,

“Even if the worst came to the worst and the bourgeoisie was to scurry under the skirts of reaction for fear of the workers, and appeal to the power of those elements hostile to itself for protection against them — even then the workers’ party would have no choice but, notwithstanding the bourgeoisie, to continue its campaign for bourgeois freedom, freedom of the press and rights of assembly and association which the bourgeoisie had betrayed. Without these freedoms it will be unable to move freely itself; in this struggle it is fighting to establish the environment necessary for its existence, for the air it needs to breathe.”

Does this mean that Engels was a reformist who recommended [that] the workers should trail behind the
bourgeoisie? Not at all. He wrote:

“We are taking it for granted that in all these eventualities the workers’ party will not play the role of a mere appendage to the bourgeoisie but of an independent party quite distinct from it. It will remind the bourgeoisie at every opportunity [and no doubt he doesn’t mean simply by words—JG] that the class interests of the workers are directly opposed to those of the capitalists and that the workers are aware of this. It will retain control of and further develop its own organisation as distinct, from the party organisation of the bourgeoisie, and will only negotiate with the latter as one power with another. In this way, it will secure for itself a position commanding respect, educate the individual workers about their class interests and when the next revolutionary storm comes — and these storms now recur as regularly as trade crises and equinoctial storms – it will be ready to act.”

Since there was a possibility of democratic revolution, Engels would denigrate the miserable facade that Bismarck was aiming to implement. But when the revolutionary situation of the 1806s had past, Engels held that even the type suffrage granted by Bismarck could be used by an organized workers’ movement. In the his introduction of March 6, 1895 to an edition of Marx’s The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850, Engels wrote:

“There had long been universal suffrage in France, but it had fallen into disrepute through the misuse to which the Bonapartist government had put it. After the Commune there was no workers’ party to make use of it. Also in Spain it had existed since the republic, but in Spain boycott of the elections was ever the rule of all serious opposition parties. ... It was otherwise in Germany. The Communist Manifesto had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat, and Lassalle had again taken up this point. When Bismarck found himself compelled to introduce the franchise as the only means of interesting the mass of the people in his plans, our workers immediately took it in earnest and sent August Bebel to the first, constituent Reichstag. And from that day on, they have used the franchise in a way which has paid them a thousandfold and has served as a model to the workers of all countries.” www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/intro.htm

Luko Willms apparently regards these tactics as betrayal. He thinks that there is a contradiction between organizing to break the power of the bourgeoisie, and yet supporting the democratic movement. So he writes:

> No, no, our comrades were very clear: we fight for material > democratic rights, for the workers to take power out of the > hands of the bourgeoisie.

But Engels had none of the sectarianism of LW, and saw the value of democratic struggle even in situations where socialist revolution was still distant. Indeed, if workers don’t organize in those situations, they will never be able to carry out socialist revolution...

Luko Willms goes on to quote Lenin, and similarly stands Lenin on his head. He cites Lenin’s The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination (October, 1915). Here Lenin defends the struggle for the right to self-determination even though it won’t by itself bring socialism. LW again takes the exact opposite meaning from the article.

He cites many passages from Lenin, but the essence is that Lenin says that

> It is absurd to contrapose the socialist revolution and the >>revolutionary struggle against capitalism to a single problem >>of democracy, in this case, the national question.

LW interprets this to mean that the democratic struggle is always simply a part of the socialist revolution. But Lenin’s meaning was just the opposite. It’s that participation in the democratic struggle is not an obstacle to the eventual socialist revolution, but is in the interests of the preparation of the socialist revolution. Thus Lenin says that

“The Russian proletariat cannot march at the head of the people towards a victorious democratic revolution (which is the immediate task) ... without immediately demanding ... for all nations oppressed by tsarism, the freedom to secede from Russia.” (The parenthetical words, “which is the immediate task”, are Lenin’s)

Geez, Lenin repeatedly and extensively discussed the different class nature of the democratic and socialist movements, of the need for the socialist workers to take part in the democratic movement, of the value of democracy for them, and of what their independent role in that movement should be. To torture quotations to mean their opposite is hardly a serious occupation.

Theoretical work has to be taken seriously. One shouldn’t simply tear things out of context, but examine the real meanings of articles. One may agree or disagree with an article, but one should understand it properly. If one wants to see what is still vitally important, what is outdated and should be revised, and what simply refers to conditions that no longer exist, one has to understand articles properly.

I discuss the relevance of Lenin’s view of the different class character of the democratic and socialist movements in my article Leninism and the Arab Spring, www. communistvoice.org/46cLeninism.html. The struggles of the Arab Spring were important even though they were not going to bring about socialism.

(Luko Willms did not reply to this.)
The 2015 UAW auto contracts
The auto capitalists make record profits, while the UAW accepts a third tier of workers with lower pay and no rights

Adapted from the Detroit Workers’ Voice email list, November 24, 2015

Introduction
Some features of these contracts
The wave of anger
But did most of the left care?
Where to go from here
From the history of the UAW
Appendix: Justin Mayhugh’s statement

Introduction

It took several months, but the UAW has pushed through contracts with Chrysler (FCA), GM, and Ford. These contracts have been signed at a time of record profits for the Big 3 auto companies, and yet they make permanent the cutbacks from 2007 and 2008. So it’s not surprising that Justin Mayhugh, a GM worker, wrote the following about these contracts:

“... I am repulsed that they [the UAW leadership] are claiming some big victory when GM’s contract only passed by 55% and Ford’s contract passed by a few hundred. I am repulsed that they willingly negotiated a third tier. ... I am repulsed at the lavish lifestyles these people lead while negotiating horrible contracts for their membership all in the sake of ‘jointness’ and ‘competitiveness.’ ... I’m tired of our union doing absolutely nothing to tell the truth about the lives of autoworkers to the public. I’m annoyed that the companies spend God knows how much money making us out to be greedy bastards to the general public, and our leadership does absolutely nothing to counter this message. I wish our leadership cared. I wish they got angry at the companies for their greed.” (The complete statement is appended at the end of this article)

Some features of these contracts

- There isn’t equal pay for equal work. Workers continue to be divided into two tiers, with tier 2 workers making far less money than tier 1. Workers were told that there is an eight-year path for the tier 2 workers to reach the wages of tier 1. But since the contract only covers four years, this is pie in the sky.
- Indeed, there is now a third tier of temporary workers who are in the worst position of all. Oh yes, the UAW leaders eliminated the two-tier system - they created a three-tier system. Indeed, the contracts have even more gradations among auto workers than that.
- Cost-of-living adjustments are still gone.
- There are some wage increases, especially for a section of the tier 2 workers, but the major wage cuts of the concessions are not restored.

- In 2007, the UAW allowed the auto companies to abandon health care responsibility for retirees by transferring it to a VEBA (Voluntary Employee Benefit Association). The auto companies were required to provide the VEBA with only a fraction of what the health care obligations were likely to be, and with that the Big 3’s obligations ended. The UAW officials get to handle the VEBA funds, but the VEBA is underfunded, and this is a threat hanging over retirees’ benefits. Now the UAW leadership wants to do the same thing to the health benefits of current workers. The 2015 contracts are written to allow this to be done.
- There is no increase in pensions for retirees.
- It’s a “living contract”, which means it can be changed during its term without approval of the UAW membership. This applies especially to the health care plan, but to everything else as well.
- Working conditions are going to get worse. Job classifications are being merged; an inhuman attendance policy has been strengthened; and AWS (Alternate Work Scheduling) is continued, which creates a jumbled workweek with ten-hour days not paying overtime.

The wave of anger

The miserable features of these contract proposals led to a wave of discontent. There is now a sense of opposition across all three companies to the concessions that are being forced down workers’ throats. This has been especially manifested in discussion on social media. As workers discovered various of the negative features of these contracts, they wrote about them on Facebook sites and hashed out the rights and wrongs about what was being proposed. UAW members were also afraid that their votes wouldn’t be counted, and many workers posted pictures of their ballots marked “no!” There were debates among workers as to how to vote, and discussion of how the UAW had gotten into this situation. Some of the most lively sites were:

- SHOW YOUR NO VOTE!
- Speak Out 2015 UAW Ford Contract (despite the name, it dealt with the GM and Chrysler contracts too)
- Reform the UAW NOW
- Autoworkers Caravan
- UAW Real Talk, GM. Ford, FCA

The lack of an extensive organization uniting militant autoworkers hindered the struggle. But the discussion on social media provided some connection among workers; spread knowledge of the different parts of the contract; and encouraged activity.

A few months before, some autoworkers from “UAW Real Talk, GM. Ford, FCA” had begun “Equality Rallies” (i.e., against the two-tier system) in front of Solidarity House (UAW headquarters). At Labor Day in Detroit this year, they passed
out leaflets denouncing the two-tier system and calling on autoworkers to insist on eliminating it. These activities only involved a handful of workers, but they reflected a rising anger among autoworkers and helped spur the mass discussion on social media. This was seen in the vote. Despite the weight of the UAW bureaucracy, and the PR firm the UAW hired to present the contract to the workers (yes, the UAW hired a PR firm, not to oppose the lies of the auto capitalists, but to lie to the UAW membership), the tentative contracts were in trouble:

- The first Chrysler tentative contract was voted down; this was a major event as the last time Chrysler workers voted down a tentative national contract was in 1982. The UAW leadership had to renegotiate the contract and provide greater wage increases for a section of the tier 2 workers, and it had to pretend to back down on its plan for a VEBA-like health care “cooperative”. This allowed the second tentative contract to pass.
- The GM contract only passed with a 55% vote. Moreover, the skilled trades section of the UAW voted it down, but the UAW leadership overrode the skilled trades’ veto by claiming that it had changed some details in the proposal.
- The Ford contract barely passed at all.

**But did most of the left care?**

It’s common in the left-wing sections of the environmental movement and other struggles to talk about the need to unite with the labor movement. Unfortunately, this is often regarded as coming to terms with the labor leaders. Yet the struggle over ratifying the auto contracts shows the gulf between the workers and the UAW leadership, which is intent on working closely with the auto capitalists.

Much of the left tries to ignore this gulf between the workers, who are struggling to get by, and the pro-capitalist top labor leaders, who often make fantastic salaries. So a number of left groups will promote strikes against the capitalists, but remain silent when the union bureaucrats trample on the workers’ interests. Perhaps this is why there was so little action this year by left groups in support of the auto workers against the proposed contracts. There are generally modest-sized demonstrations in Detroit all the time, but not in support of this year’s auto worker struggle.

All this raises the question of what the left-wing movement should base itself on: the mass of workers and their struggles, or the present union leaders, no matter what their stand is toward the capitalists? Does anyone really think that rich hacks like UAW President Dennis Williams, who betrayed the UAW’s own workers, will treat the anti-racist, environmental, and other struggles any differently?

For this or other reasons, it seemed that most of the left showed little interest in the auto workers’ struggle. There was far more argumentation on which candidate for president, if any, should be endorsed by the unions, then how to give support to the auto contract struggle.

The Green Party, for example, runs candidates in Michigan and elsewhere in the US, and devotes a lot of effort on electoral politics, and it talks about its support of labor. But it didn’t help the workers in this campaign. Amy Goodman’s popular news program *Democracy Now!* had the UAW dissident Greg Shotwell of “Soldiers of Solidarity” on a program in years past, and some other news about the UAW over the years, but was silent in this campaign. *Black Agenda Report* wasn’t concerned either, despite the importance of the auto industry for black workers. The opportunist would-be Marxist *Monthly Review* has carried some material about UAW dissidents in the past, but was silent now. And so on.

On the other hand, *Labor Notes*, which describes itself as “Putting the Movement Back in the Labor Movement”, carried a number of articles supporting the opposition to these contracts. It didn’t ask questions about why the UAW leadership would do this, but it did oppose the tentative contracts. The *World Socialist Web Site* was active in the struggle, and its many articles on the tentative contracts were posted on social media. Unfortunately, the *WSWS* promoted the sectarian, ultra-left view that unions, and democratic institutions in general, are obsolete. Representing one of the variants of Trotskyism, it didn’t just oppose the perversion of the union apparatus, but the unions themselves. *WSWS* wrote: “The auto contract struggle has demonstrated once again that the trade unions function as vital props of the corporate and political establishment in suppressing the class struggle and imposing the dictates of the financial aristocracy. Just as every other institution of bourgeois democracy has been hollowed out under the weight of class tensions and unprecedented levels of social inequality, so has the institution of ‘collective bargaining.’ Far from giving workers a democratic voice to assert their interests, the ‘negotiations’ between the so-called unions and the corporations are nothing but a conspiracy to suppress the aspirations of the working class.” (“Lessons of the the autoworkers’ battle,” 23 November 2015, www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/11/23/pers-n23.html)

Of course the union bureaucrats betray the working class. But the fight over contracts is going to remain; the fight for union organization is going to remain; and the fight over the nature of the unions is eventually going to heat up. These are real fights, not just conspiracies. The *WSWS* sees the whole world as utter betrayal of the principles that only it upholds. It sees the present existence of unions as simply something permitted by the capitalists. It believes “…the UAW only continues to exist due to the good graces of the corporations and the government, which employ it as an industrial police force against the working class”. (Jerry White, “With Ford pact in jeopardy, UAW intensified economic blackmail”, Nov. 19, 2015, http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/11/19/auto-n19.html) If this were so, then strikes and organizing drives and the building of broad workers’ organizations would be futile.

**Where to go from here**

The lack of a major organized opposition in the UAW hurt the contract struggle. The contract votes take place rapidly, and it took awhile for workers to develop a unified response to the lies of the UAW leadership. It took time to see what was in the contract: the contracts are hundreds of pages of long, written in legalese, and even refer back to other documents.
Everything is done by the negotiators to ensure the passivity of the working class.

Social media provided a way for workers to get in touch in other with each other, learn about the features of the proposed contracts, and be inspired by comradeship from workers in other plants than their own, or other auto companies. It was also a forum for debate among workers on the contracts. But the use of social media is only one step on the path towards organization.

Now that the contract votes are over, workers are pondering what to do next. A good deal with depend on whether a core of more active workers come together to form more durable networks. The auto struggle is going to continue, and probably the auto companies are going to come back and ask for more concessions long before the next contract. Indeed, the UAW leadership has already indicated that it intends to move in the direction of a health care VEBA prior to the next contract. The question is whether a durable opposition to this will develop. Moreover, it’s important for auto workers to support the struggles of other workers around the country.

From the history of the UAW

Doing this requires understanding what can be expected from the UAW leadership. Many workers, in shock at the 2015 contract, are asking how did the UAW descend to the level where its leadership could act like this? The UAW had a fighting reputation: how could it behave as it has been in the past years? Some workers, such as Mayhugh, look back to the days of Walter Reuther, but the story is more complicated. For example, black auto workers weren’t given their proper rights in the UAW by Reuther, but had to obtain them by spearheading the formation of groups such as the Dodge, Ford, and Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movements in 1968.

Examining this history is helpful in getting some perspective on what to do next. Below is a list of some articles that show part of this history:

- The CPUSA’s work in auto and the change in line of the mid-1930s, article from March 20, 1987 that shows how auto workers and activists built a militant organization, www.communistvoice.org/WAS8703CPUSA-UAW.html.

Appendix: Justin Mayhugh’s statement

For a long time now I’ve believed that any organization where there is money and power involved, humans will find a way to completely corrupt it. Whether we talk about the government, corporations, etc.

After seeing the way in which our union “leadership” has low-balled it’s membership once again, while continuing to live like kings and queens by silencing the voices of their constituents and by pushing through their agendas through their rigged conventions, I think it’s beyond safe to say that corruption has completely overtaken the UAW leadership. I can personally say that these people at the international level do not represent me. They represent FCA, Ford, and General Motors…the corporations.

They continue to lower the standard of living for their membership while lining their own pockets with our monthly dues. They continue to allow General Motors to cut jobs at my plant, while spending obscene amounts of dues money on golf courses, vacations, and (imagine this) COLA! [while UAW workers no longer get cost-of-living raises.] They continue to allow General Motors to overload our jobs. They negotiated their membership a living contract... meaning there basically is no contract. If that fact doesn’t make you see that the international simply does not care about the lives of their membership, I don’t know what will.

I am repulsed by their actions during these contract negotiations. I am repulsed that they continue to insult our intelligence. I am repulsed that they planned out the voting in the best possible way for them to get their desired results. I am repulsed that they are claiming some big victory when GM’s contract only passed by 55% and Ford’s contract passed by a few hundred. I am repulsed that they willingly negotiated a third tier.

I am repulsed that they rammmed through a dues increase by a show of hands at a convention when they knew that the vast majority of their membership were adamantly against a dues increase. I am repulsed that this dues increase was supposed to be to create a robust strike fund for 2015 to show the companies “we meant business,” even though they had zero intention on actually standing up to the companies. I am repulsed that they pushed through the right to change the strike fund to a “strike and defense fund,” so that they can now have legal access to dip into the money for whatever the hell they want to. Not that it really matters, since they were dipping into the strike money even when it was against the rules. I am repulsed at the lavish lifestyles these people lead while negotiating horrible contracts for their membership all in the sake of “jointness” and “competitiveness.”

I am repulsed that our leadership is so hell bent on cooperating with these companies that they are willing to screw over their own membership by continuing to let the companies not give a damn about quality and to run the line at a breakneck pace. I am repulsed that at my plant it’s gotten to the point where I have told myself I don’t have a committeeman when management breaks the rules, because I already know my committeeman is powerless. I am repulsed that our leadership continues to tell us anything just to get us to the next step of lowering the standard. (“Hey Ford and GM, don’t worry about the FCA negotiations, you guys are much more profitable and your deals will be much better”). In the 2015 contract this continuation of lowering the standard will more than likely be our health care, which I’m willing to bet my bottom dollar will change before this contract expires. I am repulsed at the whipsawing that the international allows to happen between local unions that promises products to the plants that are willing to let their workers get screwed over the most by the corporations through concessions.
I am repulsed at Dennis Williams smiling and hugging Sergio Marchionne like they were long, lost best friends. I am tired of our leadership being friendly with the companies. I wish our leadership were friendly to all of the membership, not just the few who spend every day trying to suck off the teat, vying for an appointed position. I’m tired of appointed positions. I’m tired of it being a matter of WHO you know and not WHAT you know. I’m tired of passionate members who want to represent their fellow membership being told “either play ball by the international’s rules or go home.”

I’m tired of the international not giving a single damn about retirees. I’m tired of retirees not having a voice. They pay union dues, they should have a voice. I’m tired of all of the fake bullshit.

I’m tired of hearing our leadership spout “solidarity” while creating another tier that will inevitably tear us apart. I’m tired of our leadership negotiating in bad faith. I am tired of our leadership moving us two steps forward, and five steps back.

I’m tired of our union doing absolutely nothing to tell the truth about the lives of autoworkers to the public. I’m annoyed that the companies spend God knows how much money making us out to be greedy bastards to the general public, and our leadership does absolutely nothing to counter this message. I wish our leadership cared. I wish they got angry at the companies for their greed. I wish our leadership would have told us “If you choose to go out on a strike, we will do everything in our power to fight the good fight. We have your backs” I’m tired of the bribes. I’m tired of our leadership accepting temp dues when they can’t offer them any protection. I’m tired of our leadership bribing temps with 2000 dollars to vote yes on a contract that will screw them over in the long run.

Where is the union I thought I was joining? Where is Walter Reuther’s UAW? When did the leadership become so passive towards management and so aggressive towards their membership? When did they quit caring? I suppose it’s easy to stop caring when you segregate yourself as much as possible from the ones you are supposed to be representing, and you don’t have to see the consequences of the contracts you are negotiating, and how those contracts will affect the membership on a day-to-day basis. How can they justify dropping 7 million dollars on upkeep for a golf course at Black Lake, and then tell you that an 8 year pathway in a 4 year contract was the best they could do? How many dues paying members do you think will actually play one damn hole of golf on that golf course? Wait... who actually gives a damn about that dumb golf course anyways? I know I don’t.

Think about this ... What does it say about our leadership that we can’t trust them to tell us the complete truth about what’s in the contract they are negotiating for us? Why should Joe Blow Line Worker have to work 8-12 hours a day and then go home and pour through hundreds of pages of a contract to get the truth because he knows there is hidden language in the fine print that’s detrimental to the worker? Why? How is this type of reprehensible actions from the international okay with anyone in the membership? I don’t get it.

From the struggle against the auto contracts and the two-tier wage system

Excerpted from the DWV list for March 6, 2015

While the UAW leadership was buddy ing up with auto management, many workers were seeking to organize a struggle against the two-tier wage system in auto. Monthly equality rallies (against two-tier wages) were held in front of UAW headquarters at Solidarity House in order to pressure the UAW leadership. Links were made between some workers, and the issues were discussed on some Facebook sites like “UAW Real Talk, GM. Ford, FCA”. The struggle built up throughout the year, and prepared for the bitter struggle that took place over the ratification of the tentative contracts.

Appeal for an equality demonstration (against two-tier wages) at Solidarity House

Below is an appeal by Tim Hall for support for a demonstration by rank-and-file auto workers in Detroit Friends,

Please come out Saturday, March 7, at noon at Solidarity House, 8000 East Jefferson, to support UAW workers who are calling for the demands below in contract negotiations.

Workers from other industries and and supporters should come out too. I will be there with a sign saying “Postal Workers Support Auto Workers! No to Two-Tier Wage System!”

The two-tier wage system, whereby new workers come in at half pay and never catch up, was introduced in 2007 in the auto industry and later, in 2012, in postal. We postal workers are suffering from it now (ours is actually three-tier). Current APWU [American Postal Workers Union] president Dimondstein is not focusing on eliminating the three-tier system in the current negotiations. Auto is in negotiations right now and there is strong rank-and-file sentiment against the two-tier system, but the UAW leadership is taking a similarly soft stand on two-tier. The two-tier (or more tiers) system not only robs the younger generation of workers of their future, but it pits the younger and older workers against each other, thus violating union solidarity and weakening the workers’ struggle against the bosses and their demands for concessions of all sorts.

Let us build solidarity between postal and auto workers!
Let’s stand up against the two and three-tier wage systems and other concessions!

... Please share this post with other workers and interested people.

– Tim Hall, a retired postal worker and editor of Struggle
*Detroit Workers' Voice* / February 1, 2016

The United Auto Workers leadership has agreed to a tentative contract with Fiat Chrysler of America that fails to solve the two-tier wage situation and proposes a ruinous health care package, and many Chrysler workers are outraged. Voting on the tentative contract is taking place later this week and into next week. Angry workers are posting large numbers of negative comments on such Facebook pages as “Show Your No Vote!” and are calling for protests at the union headquarters against the sell-out leadership. Workers, some from the Chrysler Jefferson Assembly Plant, picketed the UAW headquarters in Detroit this morning in protest of the contract. Workers are trying to mobilize a No vote to defeat this contract and get a better one.

The tentative contract has two gigantic flaws, along with many others. First, it fails to close the gap between the lower-tier workers, who make a little over half the wage for the same work as do the workers hired before October 29, 2007, when the Obama administration forced this deep concession on the workers as part of the auto bailout. The tentative contract contains raises for the lower-tier workers, but they will remain several dollars of hourly pay below the higher-paid at the end of this four-year pact. At the same time, the low-tier (called “tier 2”) workers are divided into three categories and these, too, have different wage structures, so that the UAW, if this contract is passed, will actually have a four different low-wage tiers for unskilled laborers doing the same work as the workers hired before 2007.

This is an insulting offer to the low-tier workers, some of whom have labored alongside co-workers making almost double their pay for seven years. Four more years of inequality, even though modified, is a disgrace! The auto companies are rolling in record profits. Let them restore union pay equality, is the sentiment of large numbers of Chrysler workers, who voted 95% and more to authorize striking before the tentative language was revealed. That sentiment remains very high, as the picketing today proves.

In addition, other pay matters are arousing bitter opposition. COLA, which was removed in 2007, is not restored in the new contract. It has been one of the main ways auto workers have fought inflation to defend their real wages in the past. Also, the tentative contract contains small raises for Tier 1 workers, with bonuses down the road promised if certain production goals are reached. Tier 1 workers have not had a raise (or COLA) since 2007, so this paltry money is not causing any celebrations, and will likely be eaten up by a more costly health care system (see below). Plus, promises of bonuses depending on future performance can easily turn out to be fairy tales. And bonuses are not rolled into the pay structure but are here today, gone tomorrow. Additionally, there is no raise in pensions. Retired workers are seeing their pensions eaten up by inflation and increased health care expenses under the union-controlled VEBA health apparatus. This grievous situation has ominous implications for the new health care package proposed for current workers.

The second major flaw in the tentative Chrysler contract agreed to by the UAW leaders is a plan to take health care out of the hands of the company and put it in the hands of the union, as has been done with the VEBA created for retiree health care a few years back. This is disastrous and has caused great consternation among the workers. Management would be let completely off the hook for health care, and that is enough to condemn this proposal in the eyes of alert workers. Furthermore, the shape and form of this “cooperative” is not specified. It is either secret or not yet negotiated, but at any rate, the workers are not informed how their health care is to be handled. But they are asked to vote to accept this proposal, sight unseen. Incredible!

In other matters, attendance discipline, which is already inhumanly rigid, is tightened. There is no cap on hiring temporary workers to an even lower pay than the Tier 2 long-term workers. And the list goes on.

Even the bourgeois press acknowledges that the Chrysler workers are opposing this pact on a large scale. If the workers are able to vote it down, this will be a major blow to the wage-cutting efforts of the capitalists nation-wide. Two-tier (and more-tier) wage systems have burgeoned in union contracts all over the country since one was established in auto in 2007. The two major postal unions, the APWU and the NALC, representing the majority of postal workers, adopted multiple-tier systems beginning in 2011. In the case of the APWU the traitorous leadership imposed a three-tier system in spite of a unanimous vote against two-tiers at the 2010 National Convention. In current negotiations now headed for arbitration the new APWU leadership is not demanding an end to the three-tier system, so postal clerks seem saddled with three-tier in the near future. [Arbitration hearings will begin Feb. 17, 2016.—*CV*]

If the Chrysler workers vote this sellout pact down, they will then be faced with the necessity of a hard struggle against the UAW leadership and management in order to force management to give up a better settlement. Any progress in this fight his will help the Ford and General Motors workers get better contracts. And this fight will help postal workers and workers in other industries, who face a long and difficult fight against the wage-cutting spree of the capitalist class.

by Tim Hall, *Detroit Workers’ Voice*  
(The *DWV* list item for September 23, 2015 also reprinted critiques of the contract from “What’s in the Chrysler contract?” by Gary Wolkowicz, a member of the Bargaining Committee at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant, and “Contract Lowlights”; by Autoworkers Caravan.)
Will the Pan-Africanists support the South African metalworkers?

From the DWV list for February 15, 2015

South African workers are presently one of the main forces at the forefront of the world working class movement. The last several years have seen repeated strike waves throughout South Africa. Hundreds of thousands of miners, metal workers, and other workers have been fighting against poverty and vicious repression, such as the infamous massacre of several dozen striking miners at Marikana in August 2012. [See www.communistvoice.org/DWV-120930.html for a discussion of this atrocity.] Moreover, NUMSA, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, the biggest union in South Africa with a third of a million members, is also in the forefront of the fight against the new exploitation, exploitation under the name of former liberation organizations. NUMSA is now trying to develop a better idea of socialism than the sham goal set forward by the exploiters who now call themselves socialist.

Irvin Jim is the General Secretary of NUMSA, and he made a brief speaking tour of the US in January [2015]. This acquainted a number of people with the class struggle that is heating up in South Africa. But it’s notable that quite a few forces that claim to be socialist and anti-apartheid have been silent about NUMSA. This includes the CPUSA, the Party for Socialism and Liberation, the Workers World Party, etc.

For that matter, Detroit is a city with a historic connection to both the union movement and the black people’s movement. It might have been expected that there would be intensive discussions in the Detroit left about NUMSA and the workers movement in South Africa. The celebrations of Martin Luther King Day in Detroit would, for instance, have been a natural place for discussion of support for the workers’ struggle in South Africa. But what happened at the main left-wing commemoration of MLK Day? This year, like the year before, at the meeting organized by the MLK Day Committee, only literature from the Detroit Workers’ Voice talked about NUMSA and the upsurge in the workers’ movement in South Africa. We distributed hundreds of leaflets which not only supported the current anti-racist struggle in the US, but called for solidarity with South African workers.

One might have thought that at least the Pan-Africanists, who are one of the trends represented at such meetings, would be excited about South African workers being in the forefront of the world workers movement. But one finds that groups such as the All-African Peoples Revolutionary Unification Party and the Pan-African News Wire have said nothing in their literature about Irvin Jim’s tour to the US or other recent news about NUMSA. The Pan-Africanists talk a lot about the major political leaders from the old days who espoused revolutionary or Marxist views. But what about support for the militant African workers of today?

The problem faced by the Pan-Africanists is that the South African workers movement is confronting the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. The ANC and SACP were part of the old movement against apartheid; and they came to power with the historic fall of the vicious system of apartheid. Yet the ANC and SACP have become the oppressors of the workers movement today. What happened?

Many activists and leaders of the ANC and SACP were heroes of the struggle against apartheid. But when the ANC came to power, it discarded the economic promises of the famous Freedom Charter. Instead, top ANC and SACP leaders sought positions in the big bourgeoisie that had grown up under apartheid, and many former militant leaders have become very rich indeed. Market fundamentalism in South Africa, as elsewhere, means riches for a few, and continuing poverty for the many. This sell-out was, in part, a result of the ANC and SACP having applauded for decades the bankrupt orientations promoted by the Soviet Communist Party. Even though the Soviet Union collapsed a few years before the fall of apartheid, the ANC continued to follow the oppressive practices that had been championed by the Soviet CP after it degenerated into a new ruling class in Russia.

The Pan-Africanists have an idealized view of the old parties and liberation movements that fought against colonialism in Africa and that ruled some of the newly-independent states for a time. They don’t have a realistic evaluation of the historic accomplishments and the tragic failures, nor of what was right and wrong about the supposed allies of the African movements. Instead they dream about the radical rhetoric of some of the old regimes. As a result, they don’t understand that some left-sounding organizations from the liberation struggle, such as the the ANC and SACP, could become oppressors. And if the Pan-Africanists did understand this, they would be forced to break with some of their friends of the present, such as the Workers World Party.

The Pan-Africanists are faced with a choice. They must recognize the need to fight revisionism, the political trend that shouts about socialism and anti-imperialism and Marxism, but that betrayed all these things decades ago. It is this political trend that corrupted the South African Communist Party and the ANC. Or they must fold their arms and look the other way while hundreds of thousands of militant South African workers march at the front of the world workers movement, and close their eyes tight when black workers get shot down in bloody massacres like that at Marikana. In essence, this is the same choice that faces all other activists in the American left as well.

We support the South African workers because they are our class brothers and sisters, and they are on the path of class struggle. We don’t necessarily agree with all the views they have at present, but we think that not only the boldness of their strikes, but the boldness with which they have started reconsidering inadequate views from the past, should be an inspiration to workers and activists everywhere.

The path before NUMSA and the South African workers is difficult. They are seeking a new role in the political life of
South Africa, not as ally of the ANC, but as an opponent. They are also seeking the real meaning of the socialist goal at a time when the entire world left is in theoretical and ideological crisis. There are no guarantees about how far they will go, and how long they will remain one of the forces in the van of the world movement. But for now, their struggle casts a strong light on the path which, sooner or later, workers elsewhere will have to take.

Some references
Irvin Jim’s message to Americans, 11 January 2015: white domination of the South African economy has been sustained in South Africa post-1994 and remains as vicious as ever

Irvin Jim in the US: A reply to Justice Pitsi, 10 February 2015: NUMSA says the working class shall never be fooled or

South African workers persist in struggle

From Detroit Workers’ Voice #119, Jan. 18, 2016

Today South African workers are setting an example of struggle. A key part of their struggle centers on NUMSA, the pro-socialist National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa. With well over a third of a million members, NUMSA is the largest union in the country. It has a militant history of struggle against apartheid in the old days, and against the continuing poverty today. It waged a successful month-long strike of a quarter of a million workers in 2014, but was expelled in November that year from the South African trade union federation COSATU for standing up against the free market policies of the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim described what’s going on as follows:
“The ANC, SACP [South African Communist Party] and the State have succeeded in capturing and redirecting COSATU to become a mere instrument for securing the votes of the working class every five years, with absolutely no COSATU fighting workers program of action to deal with the job blood bath we see in retrenchments, increased levels of unemployment, poverty, inequality and corruption.”
(NUMSA News #2, August 2015)

In the year since then, NUMSA has continued to grow. A number of unions suspended participation in COSATU in protest over NUMSA’s expulsion.

The militant South African workers are fighting the kind of vicious cutbacks that the workers and poor have been suffering in the U.S. and throughout the world. The capitalists use their “free market” (neo-liberal) policies to destroy the safety nets of the people and cut the wages of the workers. NUMSA

blames this robbery squarely on the capitalists and rejects the neo-liberal policies followed by the ANC today.

All over the world, corrupt union leaderships are collaborating with bourgeois parties and the capitalist employers to hold back the workers' struggles. Workers are seething with anger at the cutbacks and concessions being forced on them by the rich exploiters in country after country. In South Africa, the ANC sank to the ultimate depth in August 2012 when its police killed 41 striking black miners at Marikana, in the worst such incident since the Sharpeville massacre under apartheid. In this situation, NUMSA can no longer back the ANC and the SACP, and it is at the center of an attempt to build up a political alternative to them.

Here in the U.S., Obama's supposed economic “recovery” has meant continued unemployment or crumb-like jobs at miserable pay for millions. Food stamps, social security and many elements of the safety net are being destroyed by the combined assaults of the Republicans and the Democrats.

Employed organized and unorganized workers have been suffering from severe wage-cuts shoved down their throats by the bosses. Two- and multi-tier wage systems began in auto in 2007 as a price that Obama exacted for the auto bailout. And they spread to other major industries.

These wage cuts were imposed by the employers with the help of both the Democratic and the Republican parties, spearheaded by the Democratic union leaders. In auto, postal and elsewhere, wages were cut in half for new workers via these corrupt deals.

This fall auto workers rebelled against the tier system, voted down one tentative contract proposed by the union sellouts at Chrysler FCA and nearly voted down the rest. But the auto workers, like postal and other workers, haven’t yet found a way to build solid rank-and-file organization.

National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, NUMSA, website: www.numsa.org.za

South African workers on the march, article on the back of the DWV leaflet on the occasion of Martin Luther King Day, 2015 [see p. of this issue of Communist Voice]

On Martin Luther King Day...
The struggle continues, 2014 (material both on struggle in US and in South Africa)
http://www.communistvoice.org/DWV110.pdf

Detroit Workers’ Voice

Detroit Work ers’ Voice

#2, August 2015

#119, Jan. 18, 2016


http://www.communistvoice.org/DWV110.pdf
NUMSA is an inspiring example of workers building union organization dedicated to struggle.

For years NUMSA had backed the ANC and the SACP. But after taking power, the ANC betrayed the promise of major economic reforms made in the famous Freedom Charter, and this had led to a major political crisis in South Africa. So NUMSA is calling for employed workers to unite with the masses in the poverty-stricken communities against the rampant poverty and exploitation by the rich. NUMSA is also actively studying the path to real socialism.

Dissatisfied workers in the U.S. can learn a lot from the struggle of the fighting workers of South Africa.


South African workers on the march

From Detroit Workers’ Voice #116, Jan. 19, 2015

The struggle against apartheid electrified the world. The white racist rulers thought they were all powerful, but majority rule came to South Africa in 1994.

But just as the victories of the civil rights movement haven’t ended economic oppression, the historic fall of apartheid didn’t end it in South Africa. The African National Congress came to power, but it embraced market fundamentalism and abandoned the economic promises of the famous Freedom Charter for land, work, houses, and education for all. So did the South African Communist Party. ANC and SACP leaders have linked up with the rich white capitalists, become millionaires themselves, and preside over one of the most unequal societies in the world.

So millions of black people still live in shacks, the schools are grossly inferior, and a quarter of the population is officially unemployed. The great poverty has led to struggle, and the ANC-led government has tried in vain to stomp it out. On August 16, 2012, police slaughtered dozens of striking black miners at Marikana. But the strike wave continues. Last year there were major strikes including a five-month mining strike and a four-week strike of 200,000 metalworkers at over 10,000 workplaces.

Right in the center of this action is the largest union in the country, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which has a third of a million members. It fought apartheid in the old days, and it still defends the workers’ interests today. This has led it recently to denounced the ANC’s pro-capitalist policy. In retaliation, two months ago on November 8 the ANC and SACP leaders prevailed on the COSATU trade union federation leadership to expel NUMSA.

No matter! NUMSA has refused to back down, and it is committed to organizing even more workers. NUMSA is also seeking to unite workers with community activists in a United Front to fight neo-liberalism, poverty, and inequality.

Moreover, NUMSA has called for the building of a Movement for Socialism, in preparation for building a truly socialist party. The ANC and South African CP can’t be said to be socialist, and NUMSA is calling for a reconsideration of what socialism really is.

NUMSA activists have support from many other workers and unions. The COSATU Central Executive Committee had to act by itself to expel NUMSA rather than setting the matter before a COSATU Congress.

South African workers will not be cowed down! May their struggle inspire militant workers around the world.
Solidarity with the Palestinian people!
The BDS movement is one of the primary avenues of support for the anti-Zionist struggle and the struggle for Palestinian liberation

By Phil West, Seattle Communist Study Group (CVO)
From the DWV list of September 4, 2015

Ever since the founding of Israel, the Zionist state has been consolidating its power and further dispossessing the Palestinians. When Israel and the PLO agreed to the Oslo accords, the PLO began to be converted into a handmaiden of Zionism in the occupation of the remnants of Palestine under its control, in the guise of a corrupt “Palestinian Authority”, a semi-state subject to the political whims of the Zionist rulers of Israel. While the “two states” concept has been severely undermined by the policies of the Zionists in the West Bank, it is still the official goal of the Authority’s plan for statehood. However, the territory under the actual control of the Palestinian Authority has shrunk in the face of unending Zionist settlement expansion, while the Islamist Hamas movement took over control of the prison of Gaza.

Israel has all along shown that it would never accept a Palestinian state that had any unity and power whatsoever. At the same time, the Palestinians have continued to assert their just claim to the whole of their original homeland. As Israel engaged in repeated wars and repressive attacks on the Palestinian people, activists have more and more realized that it is an apartheid state, akin to apartheid South Africa. Support for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) among the general population has grown for this reason as well. The demand for a single, democratic, unified, non-racist state on the whole territory of 1947 Palestine has maintained considerable support among Palestinians and their sympathizers.

So Palestinian solidarity activists searched for an effective strategy to widen the resistance to Zionist oppression of the Palestinian people, and they were inspired by the role that BDS played in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. A formal call for starting a BDS movement in support of Palestine was issued by the author-activist Omar Barghouti in 2005. With each new stage in the continuous war by the Zionists against the people of Palestine, this movement has intensified. Now, the scope of this movement has reached the point where the Israeli government is reacting angrily to its efforts, charging BDS activists with “attempting to delegitimize Israel”, and “anti-Semitism”. But this hysterical reaction has not deterred BDS activists.

The BDS movement today includes both supporters of the “two-state” plan and the “one-state” plan. BDS organizations exist on a large number of US campuses. There is also a national BDS website, and widespread efforts to target all sorts of financial and artistic contacts with Israel. The movement to boycott Israeli concerns and divest investments from Israel has grown in recent years and has caused deep worry in the Israeli ruling circles. Last summer’s genocidal assault on Gaza by the Israeli military shocked the world and brought about a new wave of calls to spread the BDS effort.

The BDS campaign has developed widespread support as a form of resistance to Zionism when most other forms of resistance were blocked. It has had many successes over the last ten years. Recently, the national BDS website listed 100 significant BDS victories, involving universities, churches, and entertainers signing on to the campaign to oppose Zionism.

Since its inception, many businesses have been forced to withdraw contracts and deals from Israel — from companies that export goods grown or manufactured in Palestinian land at the cost of Palestinian rights. Also affected are companies like G4S that provide ‘equipment’ to the Israeli authorities used at the apartheid-style ‘check points’ preventing freedom of movement for Palestinians, and which also provide equipment to prisons that illegally detain Palestinians, often indefinitely, including the imprisonment of children.

The growth of BDS has resulted in academic boycott campaigns aimed at Israel in university campuses around the world, and also with many world renowned artists cancelling showcases and performances in Israel. Artists like Lauren Hill, Gil Scott Heron, Snoop Dogg, and Elvis Costello, sports figures like basketball legend Kareem Abdul Jabbar, academics and writers including Alice Walker, Naomi Klein, Stephen Hawking, and Arundhati Roy have all publicly denounced Israel’s human rights abuses and have shown support for the BDS movement. The sanctions effort has also spread into the financial sector, and as a result, Reuters reported recently that “Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Israel dropped by almost 50% last year in comparison to the year before as the country continues to feel the effects of last summer’s Gaza conflict, a new UN report has revealed.”

On the West Coast last year, there was a mass campaign to block ships owned by the Israeli-owned ZIM shipping lines from docking in Oakland, Seattle, and other ports. But eventually, the movement began to die down temporarily, and this revealed the weakness of much of the BDS activity, and the challenges that the movement faces. BDS is essentially built around reformist conceptions, but it provides opportunities for revolutionary activists to reach out and make new contacts who see the injustices that face the Palestinian people and want to aid them in their struggles. What the BDS movement needs is energetic leadership to seek every possible opportunity and develop the strength of the available forces. This movement can make a significant contribution to the struggle of the Palestinian people throughout the Middle East.
New confirmation that Israel is a racist society

By Tim Hall, editor of Struggle literary zine
From the DWV list of July 9, 2015

Since at least the 1960s progressive activists supporting Palestinian liberation have been declaring that Zionist Israel is a racist society. Palestinians were robbed of their homeland, driven out by the millions, murdered wantonly, and those remaining have been made into second-class citizens. To be Arab in Israel was (and is) to be stigmatized, threatened and even killed. Revolutionary activists around the world denounced Israeli Zionism.

At the same time, these activists declared that Jewish people as a whole were not the enemy; the enemy was the Zionist state. “Yes to Jewish people; no to Zionism!” was one of the slogans raised at demos.

Through the long years until now, the Zionist state of Israel went on consolidating its power and further disfranchising the Palestinians. The policy of “two states” showed its impotence as the West Bank, under the corrupt bourgeois semi-state of the Palestinian Authority, shrank in the face of unending Zionist settlement expansion, while the Islamist Hamas ruled the prison of Gaza. Israel was not going to accept a Palestinian state that had any unity and power whatsoever; at the same time, the Palestinians had a just claim to the whole of their original homeland. More and more, activists were pointing out that Israel is an apartheid state, akin to apartheid South Africa. The demand grew for a single, democratic, unified, non-racist state on the whole territory of 1947 Palestine.

The movement to boycott Israeli concerns and divest investments from Israel grew in recent years and has caused deep worry in the Israeli ruling circles. Last summer’s genocidal assault on Gaza by the Israeli military shocked the world.

“For foreign direct investment (FDI) in Israel dropped by almost 50% last year in comparison to the year before as the country continues to feel the effects of last summer’s Gaza conflict, a new UN report has revealed.” Reuters, 6-25-15.

Ethiopian Jews, black people who have emigrated to Israel in response to famine in their homeland and to promises of a better life, have erupted in protest against racist conditions and racist attacks. The Black Lives Matter movement has emerged in Israel. Ethiopians comprise two per cent of the Israeli population and one-fifth of the prison population, a statistic which mirrors the fate of Blacks in the U.S. (as well as in the UK, according to recent reports). Israel has been the scene of racist anti-Ethiopian pogroms (or riots) in recent months. These conditions have given rise to a vigorous protest movement, which is affirming, once again, the long-standing progressive slogan: ZIONISM IS RACISM.
The betrayal of the anti-austerity movement in Greece

The left-wing party Syriza had given voice to the anti-austerity movement in Greece. But after half a year of negotiations with the European financial authorities, and after the referendum of June 25 in which the Greek people rejected the vicious demands of the European bourgeoisie, Syriza betrayed the working people, abandoned its program, and became another austerity party.

The article below asks whether Syriza will split. Since it was written, Syriza has indeed split. A new party, “Popular Unity”, was formed on August 21; with 36 members of the Greek parliament it was briefly the third largest group in parliament. But in the subsequent elections of September 20, it gained only 2.9% of the vote, just below the 3% threshold for representation. Thus it has no members in the current parliament.

Popular Unity had faced a difficult situation: it had to run an election campaign a month after it was founded. But Popular Unity also faced, not just practical difficulties, but dealing with a number of questions that Syriza had always swept under the rug. There is little sign that it has.

As a result, Popular Unity has drifted since the elections, taking part in the anti-austerity movement but having no answer to what went wrong with Syriza. It talks more frankly about the prospect of leaving the Eurozone than before, but it doesn’t have a strategy to take account of the new situation: with Syriza having betrayed the anti-austerity movement, there is no prospect of an immediate governmental rejection of austerity. The agony of the Greek workers will continue; there will be no quick relief; and the people face a protracted struggle against austerity.

So it won’t work to imagine simply recreating a better version of Syriza. Instead, there is going to have to be more attention to what went wrong with Syriza and why it capitulated to the bourgeoisie, and more attention to the question of how to overcome the weaknesses and divisions in the Greek left and working class movements.

Below:

Will Syriza split? ... August 6, 2015.
Greece at the crossroads ... Feb. 8, 2015.
The political earthquake in Greece ... Jan. 29, 2105
All eyes on Greece ... Jan. 19, 2015
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Will Syriza split?

By Joseph Green
From the DWV list of August 6, 2015

The extent of the capitulation
Was it right to build Syriza despite the outcome?
- On the structure of Syriza
- Uniting many left trends
- Telling the people what they want to hear
- Who controlled the government?
- The social movements and Syriza
- The Syriza left-wing
- The story of Plan B

The submission of the Tsipras government to the stepped-up austerity demanded by the European bourgeoisie means the end of his party, Syriza, as an alternative to the sold-out parties of the Greek bourgeoisie. Syriza, the Coalition of the Radical Left, had won the election of January 2015 as a protest against austerity and an alternative to the establishment parties, all of whom, whether conservative or “socialist”, supported austerity. Now its leader, Alexis Tsipras, presently the Prime Minister of Greece, says austerity must be accepted, and uses the votes of the establishment parties to pass it. This means that Syriza has lost its soul.

Protest against capitulation to the European financiers has swept Syriza since mid-July. As the deal was announced, the majority of the Central Committee said it opposed it. The largest regional organizations in Syriza, those in Athens and Thessaloniki, are opposed to it, and so are many other Syriza branches. The national youth organization is said to have opposed it. Syriza members of parliament tend to belong to the more rightist factions of the party, but still a quarter of them voted against capitulation. Even several ministers opposed it, and were later replaced by Tsipras.

Indeed, the decision to capitulate was taken by the Tsipras government alone, not the Syriza organization. It wasn’t even taken by discussion of the whole government, just a handful [of ministers], and ultimately only by Tsipras. But Tsipras has the backing of the rightist factions in Syriza and the power of his leadership positions, so it looks like Syriza will not repudiate him, but will instead be disciplined by him.

If so, this means that it isn’t sufficient that there is anger against Tsipras in Syriza. The question is whether the left section in Syriza, the section who refuses to kiss the ass of the
European big bourgeoisie, the section who takes the Syriza program seriously, will agree to work with Tsipras anyway, or whether it will form a separate organization. If the opposition separates, it can continue the struggle against austerity. If it doesn’t, then it becomes decorative window-dressing for a party that is now carrying out austerity. The appropriate timing of a split is something that can only be determined by the Greek comrades, not from far away. But serious opposition to austerity requires separation.

The extent of the capitulation

Tsipras’s deal with the troika is the worse one ever. On the pretext that they don’t trust the Tsipras government, the institutions of the troika (European Central Bank, European Commission, and International Monetary Fund) are insisting on even harsher conditions than previously. Tsipras has agreed to everything, and he rushes every outrageous demand from the European bourgeoisie through the Greek parliament, without even leaving a decent time to debate them. They must be passed on the timetable demanded by the financiers who are presently the real rulers of Greece.

Tsipras had earlier promised to deal with what he aptly called the humanitarian disaster caused by austerity, and to protect those who were especially endangered: threatened with homelessness, loss of medical care, unemployment, or cuts in pensions, etc. But the new austerity conditions will make the ongoing disaster worse. The new measures will remove protections which Syriza had pushed through parliament earlier this year. So there will be more cuts in pensions; higher retirement ages; more fees; more unemployment; castration of collective bargaining; etc. That’s not to speak of the heavy increase in the sales tax (VAT) from 13% to 23%, which will serve as an automatic wage cut for workers and bear especially hard on the poor.

Every protection, however modest, that the working people might have had is being stripped away. A week after the vote of July 16 on the troika’s economic demands, two additional bills were pushed through parliament that changed Greek law in this direction. For example, previously, when companies went bankrupt, whatever assets were left went first to the employees and retirees, but now the bankruptcy banks are to be paid first. Moreover, it is to be easier to foreclose on homes. These laws will deepen the humanitarian crisis, ensuring that the hard times hurt people as badly as possible. Kick them when they’re down, and keep kicking them, over and over and over. These bills were opposed by 29,290,000 Greek people vote “no” against the austerity program. The five months of brutal ultimatums by the troika against the Tsipras government resulted in more and more people considering the possibility that radical measures would be needed against the financial institutions of the European bourgeoisie. They voted “no” despite the European Central Bank strangling the Greek economy by forcing Greek banks to shut down. The Tsipras government will now do its best to smother the anti-austerity struggle, but it will return again in a new form.

On the structure of Syriza

Syriza was one of several organizations that have been hailed as a world model for the revitalization of the left. But the capitulation of the Tsipras government to the troika wasn’t simply due to Tsipras and a few top ministers. It could only take place if there were also organizational and political weaknesses in Syriza that made such a spectacular collapse possible.

Thus throughout the world, workers and activists will be trying to understand if there was something wrong with how Syriza was built, something that led to this debacle. I will not set forward a model of a perfect organization to replace Syriza: no one would listen to such a plan anyway. Instead I will indicate some of the problems that arose: what activists hoped they were doing, and what went wrong along the way. I hope to encourage activists to ponder for themselves these issues, and consider how they are reflected in other organizations. Activists will have to decide how to build something better than Syriza, something that is a step closer to the organization of class struggle needed by the working class.
So let’s examine some of the features of Syriza.

**- Uniting many left trends**

Syriza was formed in 2004 as a coalition of a number of left trends and individuals. The groups maintained their existence, but united in support of Syriza. Then in 2013 there was an attempt to turn Syriza into a “unitary party” into which its constituent parties would dissolve; this aimed at weakening the left-wing of Syriza, which, however, maintained itself.

The different groupings included many social-democrats, Eurocommunists, Maoists, Trotskyists, and others. With regard to the economic crisis since 2009, it included those committed to keeping Greece in the Eurozone (the 19 of the 28 states of the EU who use the Euro as their local money), and those who wanted Greece to return to having its own currency, the drachma. Everyone was united on the demand to end austerity, and the Thessaloniki Programme of September 2014 put forward social measures aimed at ending the humanitarian crisis caused by years of austerity.

No doubt certain political debates continued inside Syriza. But they did not overcome the theoretical crisis of the left or clarify what should be done if the European bourgeoisie refused to renegotiate its financial arrangements with Greece. Syriza was united on the need to get rid of austerity, but not on other things. This unity made Syriza into a major electoral force: instead of the ineffectiveness of a multitude of small groups with clashing programs, one had unity.

But when the Tsipras government found that it couldn’t implement the Thessaloniki Programme through negotiations with the troika, the different factions in Syriza were divided on what to do, and Syriza as a party wasn’t prepared to deal with the situation. Even the factions who call for leaving the Eurozone don’t seem to have given much concrete thought over what had to be done.

The left does have to learn how to overcome sectarianism. But just shoving every difference under the rug hasn’t worked either. Syriza didn’t overcome the ideological crisis of the left; it didn’t solve the key issues about what to do if the European financial institutions wouldn’t accept the end of austerity; and it fell apart on these issues.

Here we see something that we will see again and again: the same feature was both a strong point and a weak point of Syriza. By ignoring major political differences, it united a major section of the left (aside from the Stalinist KKE), and this unity was important for its spectacular electoral triumphs. But its failure to make any progress with the theoretical crisis of the radical movement left it disoriented in the face of the brutal opposition of the bourgeoisie.

**- Telling the people what they want to hear**

Syriza campaigned for election on ending austerity while insisting that Greece would definitely be staying in the Eurozone. This reflected the views of a majority of the Greek people: they wanted an end to the austerity that is strangling them, but also wanted accommodation with EU financial institutions. They may have had a number of different reasons for this stand. Many probably believed that using the Euro was a guarantee of a certain economic stability; as well, many saw EU institutions as a guarantee against the return of a new military dictatorship such as the one which oppressed Greece in 1967-74, and believed that being in the Eurozone helps cement Greece’s position in the EU. Some consciously oppose the EU bourgeoisie, but believed that only a joint struggle of workers throughout the EU would have sufficient strength to fight the market-fundamentalist offensive. And in the election, Syriza told the people what they wanted to hear: we can end austerity and definitely still have the Euro. That may be why it won the election.

But this was an unrealistic position. There was no way to guarantee that the troika would negotiate a deal that would accept the Thessaloniki Program. And if it didn’t, Greece might be forced, whether the government wanted to or not, to leave the Eurozone. For example, while in the Eurozone, the supply of money is at the mercy of the European Central Bank, which could shut down the Greek banks and strangle the economy at will. This was, in fact, what the troika threatened to do, and finally did. There is no way to restore Greek economic life in defiance of such actions by the ECB except by taking steps that might lead to Greece being expelled from the Eurozone.

Here, too, the same position represents the strength and weakness of Syriza. It told the people what they wanted to hear, but then it couldn’t implement it. It mobilized people around a major demand of Greek life – the end to austerity – which is a proper thing to do. But the Tsipras leadership didn’t tell the people that they had to risk leaving the Eurozone if they were to accomplish this.

**- Who controlled the government?**

The decision to capitulate to the troika was taken by Prime Minister Tsipras, who has also been the head of Syriza since 2009. The fate of Syriza was thus determined by one individual. The decision was not debated in the Syriza Central Committee before it was taken. It was not even a decision of the entire government.

As first revealed by ex-Finance Minister Yanis Yaroufakis, the government had a small working group of four or five people seeking to develop “Plan B”. Yaroufakis’s Plan B aimed at keeping the Greek economy going despite the sabotage of the European Central Bank, and it involved setting up a parallel payment and banking system which was independent of the one associated with the ECB. It wouldn’t in itself have meant leaving the Eurozone, but it would have been a step in this direction. Only a handful of ministers even discussed Plan B, and it was eventually rejected. That decision by Tsipras in effect meant that the government was at the mercy of the troika. That decision not only wasn’t made by Syriza, it was secret from both the people and Syriza.

It is the Greek Constitution that gives the government power to make decisions, but it is Syriza which decides whether it is going to exercise any control over what its members do while in the government. Syriza has a loose form of organization in some ways, but the flip side of this, is that
it apparently lets its leadership do what it pleases. It could have forced Tsipras to have the key decision on the austerity agreement made collectively, under pain of expelling Tsipras and bringing down the government, but instead it let Tsipras act by himself.

This was not simply an organizational matter, of course. Tsipras had support from the more rightist factions in Syriza, and they let them concentrate power in his hands. But it also reflects the organizational nature of Syriza. According to one account, this concerned even the selection of certain candidates to run for office against the will of the local committees. But I haven’t been able to find a reliable account of how Syriza selects its candidates for public office.

- The social movements and Syriza

Those who saw Syriza as a new type of left organization emphasized that it was built on the basis of social movements. It was supposed to show a new way of relating these movements to political organizations. The social movements weren’t to be directed by Syriza or coordinated too closely with it; they would maintain a certain distance from the party. But Syriza was supposed to reflect the common desires of the various movements.

This loose connection was a way of dealing with the sectarianism and bullying of activists in the mass movements by various Stalinist, Trotskyist, or other parties. It addressed a real problem, but this way of dealing with it put a major separation between Syriza and the movement activists who supported it. It should be noted that Syriza only has limited influence in the trade union movement, which is divided among several antagonistic trends. But Syriza has strong links with a variety of activists in other movements.

This way of dealing with the social movements also seems to have meant that Syriza couldn’t directly rely on a strong base of activists, even though these activists were supporters. Its supporters were divided by the social movement they were in; they were also divided by what political trend they backed; and Syriza’s own special sphere would seem to have been the elections.

At least, this is how I think Syriza worked. The descriptions of Syriza by those who promoted it around the world are generally fairly sketchy, and I have had to rely on them. Should others know more about the way Syriza worked, I would appreciate if they would write in with their information.

The problem with this method of organization would come up as soon as one tried to change Greek economic life. In order to fight austerity and to restrict the patronage and corruption in the state apparatus, it requires more than passing bills in parliament or relying on the apparatus of some ministries. It would require mobilizing workers and activists and sympathetic administrators to oversee a mass of activities formerly supposedly run by the state. Indeed, leaving the Eurozone would involve a period of economic sacrifice and reorganization that would need thousands upon thousands of people ready to fight bourgeois sabotage, oversee banks and various companies, ensure proper distribution of scarce goods, extend social services, and carry out the multitude of emergency tasks needed until the overall economy stabilizes. Moreover, the Greek unions are sharply divided, and this would limit their role in economic reorganization. In this situation, it would be especially necessary for Syriza to be able to rally a mass of activists around itself and encourage coordination between them.

So here too Syriza’s strength is its weakness. It joined together the social movements by its hands-off approach, but this also weakened its connection with the activists and their role in Syriza.

- The Syriza left-wing

Although Syriza is officially an organization of the radical left, “radical” may mean many things. In fact, it has a moderate majority and a more militant left-wing. It is the left-wing that openly opposed Tsipras’s agreement with the troika, and that Tsipras now seeks to remove from party positions.

The left has had substantial representation in the Syriza Central Committee. And the grouping called the “Left Platform” was represented, until he purged them for opposing the new austerity deal, by four ministers in the Tsipras government. But the declarations of these ministers hadn’t represented government policy. They might militantly declare that the government would never accept privatization, but it was because they were worried that Tsipras was going to concede on this too. This happened on one issue after another. Such declarations may have had a certain value in putting some pressure on Tsipras, but they also had the effect of obscuring what the actual policy of the government was. It is definitely to their credit that the “Left Platform” ministers did not go along with Tsipras’s capitulation, but their policy while in the government seemed to be largely that of a verbal leftism.

There is also a limit to how serious economic planning by the left in Greece has been. The left in Syriza would rather have Greece leave the Eurozone then bow to the demands of the troika. And the radical left outside Syriza mainly advocates leaving the Eurozone. But the left hasn’t been that concerned to consider the concrete measures needed to leave the Eurozone, the opposition they would face, and how they could be carried out against that opposition. It has noted certain necessities, such as nationalizing the banks and seizing additional control of the economy, but has not looked at things closely. The most detailed plan seems to be that put forward in the book Against the Troika: Crisis and Austerity in the Eurozone, by the German economist Heiner Flasbeck and the Syriza member of parliament Costas Lapavitsas. But it didn’t appear until early this year.

The anti-Eurozone left seems to have especially failed to consider the problem of maintaining popular support for exiting the Eurozone during the temporary period of economic hardship that would follow. Lapavitsas deals with some of this, writing at the end of Chapter 7, that

“It cannot be overstressed that the path of confrontational exit [i.e. exiting the Eurozone while being sabotaged by the EU’s financial institutions-JG], requires political legitimacy
and active popular support, if it is to be handled successfully by a government on the Left. It is important that the government should make it clear that exit would be forced on it by the EU refusing to accept reasonable terms in writing off debt and lifting austerity. It is also important to obtain open political support by putting the issue squarely to the electorate and the organized labour movement.”

But there is much more to consider, given that the left and “the organized labor movement” will be split, no matter how squarely the issue is put.

Instead, it is typical for the Greek left to overestimate the likely extent of support of the masses for radical economic steps, and thus underestimate the political preparation needed for it. And, in part due to the legacy of the Trotskyist theory of “permanent revolution”, and in part due to the legacy of Stalinist illusions, major steps against market fundamentalism are regarded as going beyond capitalism. But fierce resistance to the capitalists isn’t yet overcoming capitalism as a system.

Greece is not ready for socialist revolution at this time; it is a class struggle against austerity and the strangulation of the economy that is on the agenda; it is a bitter fight against market fundamentalism, in defense of the needs of the working masses, and against environmental disaster. This struggle would help turn the workers’ movement into an independent political force, a mass revolutionary force whom aim is socialism. But if Varoufakis has reformist dreams of saving the capitalists from themselves, it is no more realistic to believe that the socialist revolution is upon us now. It is a period of one crisis after another and repeated struggles that is coming closer by the moment, but the ultimate victory is still distant.

Nevertheless, the importance of the left in Syriza is shown by its immediate opposition to Tsipras’s capitulation. It will also face having to separate from the organization dominated by Tsipras. In doing so, it will face uniting the masses on a new program of fighting austerity, a new basis of unity, and not simply duplicating what Syriza was before Tsipras’s betrayal.

- The story of Plan B

The secrecy of the Tsipras government, and the concentration of power in Tsipras’s hands, is illustrated by how Plan B was handled. One of Syriza’s weaknesses was that it lacked an alternate plan of what to do if the troika wouldn’t accept a deal and instead sought to starve Greece into submission, as in fact the European Central Bank tried to do during the austerity referendum of July 5. Plan A was the idea of getting the troika to agree to something reasonable. Plan B would be how to proceed against troika opposition. Varoufakis’s version of Plan B dealt only with the immediate need for a parallel financial system. It would have been an essential step to resist the troika, but it barely scratched the surface of the preparations that were needed. But what’s notable is that Plan B was prepared in secret. This meant that there was no discussion of it among the masses, or even in Syriza. Indeed, we wouldn’t even know about Plan B if Varoufakis hadn’t talked about it in an interview after he was dismissed as Finance Minister.

Varoufakis pointed out that, to really be prepared, the government would have needed to put hundreds of people to work on Plan B, while Tsipras only allowed four or five people to work on this. This was because it was thought that, if enough people worked on the plan, it wouldn’t be secret, and the troika would find out and be enraged. And Tsipras’s idea of negotiations was to avoid irritating the troika at all costs. No matter how badly the troika behaved, no matter how much it showed its contempt for the Greek government and its lack of concern for the plight of homeless and starving people in Greece, Tsipras pretended that he was dealing with reasonable people with reasonable concerns.

If Tsipras had defied the troika, he would have to put Plan B into effect. To do this without much preparation would have risked economic collapse. Tsipras thinks he has avoided this disaster because he has jettisoned Plan B, replaced Varoufakis with a more pliable Finance Minister, and agreed to whatever the troika wants. But almost everyone agrees that the new austerity plans are unrealistic, and the Greek debt crisis will continue. The troika will blame this on the Greek people, and so Greece may eventually be forced out of the Eurozone anyway, but under far worse conditions than if it had defied the troika.

There is more that could be said about the structure of Syriza. The above description is not meant as the last word on the subject.

Tsipras’s deal with the troika will lead to a deeper humanitarian disaster in Greece, and, moreover, it may even unravel. This makes it all the more important to continue solidarity with the Greek workers and activists who will continue to fight the market fundamentalist hell of austerity no matter who tells them to stop. We need to support their struggles, but also to learn from their setbacks.

Greece at the crossroads

From the DWV list of Feb. 8, 2015

A comment by Tim Hall, supplemented by material from a Bloomberg article, on the situation in Greece

The European banks are stepping up their robbery of the Greek workers and poor, applying intensified, immediate pressure on the new, anti-austerity Syriza government, essentially demanding that it betray its promise to the voters
who just elected it, a promise that it would fight the austerity cuts to the livelihood of the masses demanded by the big European banks. The Greek masses are reeling from severe cutbacks that have made their lives very miserable and precarious.

Syriza may be forced to take radical measures against the banks right away – or capitulate. It did not expect to be presented with this choice so rapidly; it wanted to negotiate, but now the big capitalists are forcing it to decide what course it will take. Syriza needs to fund the Greek banks in the short run and would normally do this with funds from the European Central Bank, but this has just been denied (see article below). This may force Syriza to either default on the existing loans or nationalize the Greek banks, other words, to take radical measures to benefit the people – or to give in to the austerity demands of the European Central Bank and betray the anti-austerity desires and demands of the working class and people.

European hardliners and the European Central Bank are trying to force the Syriza-led new Greek government to make a decision right away. They are applying pressure on the Greek banking system by turning off support from the European Central Bank. This is a big test of Syriza and the anti-austerity movement in Greece and Europe. Syriza has not said what it would do in this situation. We hope for radical measures, but we will see what it does.

In the U.S. both the Democrats and the Republicans are on a cutback warpath against the workers and the poor. Greece and Syriza are further down this road. The Greek struggle will bear many lessons for American workers. We should watch it closely.


“"As Greece’s creditors line up to oppose the country’s demand for a debt restructuring, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’s refusal to accept more bailout loans may result in a cash crunch as early as next month, two people familiar with the country’s financial position said.

“The ECB’s move may be the harbinger of a harder stance by Greece’s European creditors. In order for the government to pay its bills beyond next month, it needs the so-called troika of ECB, European Commission and the International Monetary Fund to agree to lift a 15 billion-euro ceiling on the amount of short-term debt it can issue.”

The political earthquake in Greece

by Joseph Green
From the DWV list of January 29, 2015.

The anti-austerity voters had their say in Greece on Sunday. Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left) won a major victory on promises to end austerity, provide relief for the destitute masses, and end the dictatorship over Greek affairs of the “troika” of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF. Syriza’s Alexis Tsipras has been sworn in as Prime Minister.

This is a victory for those without money, those Greeks whose water and electricity have been cut off, for those who have been thrown into hunger and desperation. It’s a victory for workers around the world who have seen their families and their neighbors face similar threats. It’s a slap at the heartless rule of the neo-liberal institutions.

A first step

The election is a first step, but it’s not the imminent end of austerity. If the new Greek government carries through on its promises, it will be a new stage in what is going to be a long struggle. But the political situation in Greece is by no means settled.

Sunday’s election was a great victory; Syriza will have 149 out of 300 seats, and it is the dominant force in the new government. But it achieved this with the votes of somewhat more than a third of the voters (36.34%). It will have almost half the seats in parliament only because it benefits from the extra 50 seats which, in the Greek system, are awarded to the party with the most votes. Meanwhile the conservative and pro-austerity New Democracy party, which lost the election, retained somewhat over one quarter of the votes cast (27.81%); they barely lost votes at all (Syriza’s gains came from the continuing collapse of the other bourgeois party, PASOK). And the bloodstained neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, despite many of its leaders being in jail, received over 6% of the votes, thus having the third largest vote tally of the seven parties that will have seats.

Moreover, in order to obtain a parliamentary majority, Syriza formed a coalition with the “Independent Greeks” party (ANEL), which received somewhat under 5% of the vote and will have 20 seats in the parliament. The Independents are a racist, ultra-nationalist party and stem from a split in New Democracy. They denounce austerity, but stand for reactionary social and political policies, such as imposing the Greek Orthodox religion, opposing immigrants, and fanning nationalist quarrels with neighboring Turkey, Macedonia, and Albania. Yet ANEL’s leader, Panos Kammenos, was appointed minister of defense. No doubt Syriza dwarfs ANEL in the coalition, whose character will be determined mainly by Syriza, but Tsipras is playing a dangerous game by including
them. Indeed, Tsipras allied with them in the past in an earlier parliamentary fight in 2013. The calculation seems to be that the ultra-nationalists, out of hatred for foreigners, will agree to more determined measures against the EU bankers than would be accepted by other political groupings.

So the Tsipras government will not only face opposition from the economic institutions of the European and Greek bourgeoisie, but will start with only limited popular support. If it succeeds in carrying out measures that relieve the suffering of many desperate and impoverished Greeks, it may gain enthusiastic majority support and transform Greek politics. But that will depend on what is accomplished in the coming period.

**A class struggle**

Austerity and market fundamentalism are backed by powerful forces who don’t give a damn about the welfare of the people. So ending austerity isn’t simply a matter of formulating some fancy economic plans and finding loopholes in the debt agreements binding Greece. It is instead a question of the relative strength of the bankers, capitalists, and the wealthy “1%” versus the strength of the workers, the unemployed, and all those on the bottom of the system. It is a question of whether the “1%” can continue to rally large numbers of the “99%” to support the conservative policies that support the ultra-rich, or of how many of the “99%” will instead recognize the source of their misery in the rule of the “1%”.

In saying this, I don’t mean that the Tsipras government is the representative of the working class struggle. The question instead is whether the working class can exert pressure, including on the Tsipras government. It is important that the Tsipras government carries out its promises to relieve what he justly calls a humanitarian crisis. But whether these measures can be maintained against the vicious opposition that will come from the Eurobourgeoisie and the Greek bourgeoisie will depend on what happens among the masses.

At this point, no one yet knows precisely what the Tsipras government will do, or how the European financiers will respond. But how the Greek masses react to the threats and pressures that will be placed on them will be central to the outcome.

**Breaking with the establishment parties**

One thing the Greek example already shows is that the fight against austerity involves building an alternative to the bourgeois parties. In Greece, the two big parties that dominated politics and formed governments were New Democracy and the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), that is, the conservatives and the “socialists”. PASOK had brought some important reforms to Greece, but it’s an establishment party that, when economic times turned bad, snapped the austerity whip over the masses and took back what it had granted before. From the point of view of the policy declarations of politicians, this might seem incredibly contradictory and totally incomprehensible. But politics is ultimately based on class logic, on the stands of the contending classes, and not on verbal formulas or “heartfelt” political slogans. Despite the socialist label, PASOK was a bourgeois party, and when push came to shove, it reflected bourgeois ideas about the economic situation and carried out the economic offensive of the bourgeoisie. As a result of its turn to austerity PASOK, which had at one time regularly received 40-50% of the vote, is temporarily down to single-digits: 7.6% last Sunday.

So it took a new political movement to fight austerity. In the US, that would correspond to abandoning hopes in the liberal Democrats and their honeyed words and instead building something separate from both Democrats and Republicans.

Syriza was built up on the basis of connection to the social movements, and its theorists boast of its nonsectarian character. The Greek left is as divided ideologically and practically as the left anywhere else. But a large section of it united to build Syriza, which thus inherited a core of cadre from the radical tradition in Greek politics. Greece has many anti-capitalist parties and a strong communist tradition, albeit we will see in a moment that this tradition has two sides to it.

Thus Syriza doesn’t stem from a left faction of PASOK, but from a different tradition. PASOK has seen left factions splinter off it, but their stands haven’t been much better than PASOK’s.

Still, more is demanded of a would-be militant pro-working class party than being separate from PASOK. Syriza hasn’t overcome the political and theoretical crisis of the Greek left, and it faces its own problems. For example, despite its pride in being a broad organization, there’s a limit to how far Syriza has brought the masses into its planning. It puts forward a program which deals with many important measures to mitigate the suffering of the masses, and with some technical economic plans for financing these crucial promises. But it didn’t discuss with the masses how it intended to implement these measures in the face of expected opposition. For example, what should be done if the European financial institutions won’t renegotiate the infamous “Memorandum of Understanding” of 2012 which binds Greece hand and foot to economic misery? And what should be done if Syriza didn’t obtain an outright parliamentary majority by itself? The coalition with the Independents was something that Tsipras and other had looked towards before the election. But it comes as a major shock to many Syriza supporters.

So Syriza is not the final word in what an organization should be like. There will be other critical questions that come to the fore, and Syriza has left its policy obscure on these too. There is the question of how the Greek unions will react to the struggle with the European bourgeoisie. There is the question of how can Syriza defend immigrants while in coalition with the anti-immigrant Independents. And there will be more. Activists around the world will be watching to see what Syriza does right and what wrong, and considering how this bears on what they themselves should do.

**The tragedy of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE)**

The radical tradition in Greece includes a long history of
mass communist activity, and this was crucial in the resistance to fascism in World War II and other struggles. Unfortunately, however, the Stalinist trend has dominated the communist movement numerically, and it is communist in name only. This is the trend that captured the original Communist Party of Greece, which still exists and has mass support. It received 5.5% of the vote in the recent elections and will have 15 seats in the new parliament. If there are questions concerning what Syriza will do, there are certainly questions regarding the KKE.

In the last few decades, the KKE has followed a policy that has veered back and forth between right and left. It offered to support the PASOK government in 1981, but — believe it or not! — was briefly part of a coalition government with New Democracy in 1989. At present it is probably best known for its sectarianism towards mass struggles that aren’t directly under its leadership.

The basis of its disruptive stands is that it still upholds the Stalinist parody of communism. It call for “people’s power”, but it conceives this as the oppressive state-capitalist system that used to exist in Eastern Europe and Russia. It has learned nothing from the past, neither about the difference between state-capitalism and socialism nor about how to side with the people, rather than oppressive bureaucrats. Its idea of militancy is to claim that every activity, except supporting the KKE, is capitulation to the EU and NATO. It ignores or opposes democratic struggles around the world, from Syria to Ukraine to Hong Kong, and it holds repeated international conferences with the discredited forces of state-capitalism that still hang on around the world.

In the just concluded election, the KKE’s activity was to declare that anything except voting for KKE was servility to the EU or NATO. All the KKE leadership saw in the mass agitation by Syriza against austerity was a supposed left-sounding cover for capitalism.

We in the Communist Voice Organization say that real communism means opposing the reactionary nonsense of the KKE and other Stalinist parties. No doubt most of KKE’s supporters really want liberation, and indeed there was once a time when the KKE fought valiantly against the fascists and reactionaries. But respect for the struggles of the past requires telling the truth about what the KKE has been for decades and is today, and denouncing its support of oppression around the world. It requires looking into the political basis for the reactionary stands of the KKE; the problem with the KKE isn’t simply that it is incredibly sectarian, but what it stands for and wants to achieve.

Solidarity with the Greek people

The election of the Tsipras government will open a period of struggle in Greece. The Greek masses deserve the support of workers and activists everywhere. If this struggle finds an echo in other countries around Europe, where the workers also suffer from austerity, it may usher in a period where the opposition in Europe to the pro-austerity parties grows from the left, instead of the right. If the Eurobourgeoisie is forced to back down from its economic strangulation of Greek workers, this will be a major crack in the neo-liberal policy of the world bourgeoisie.

The example of the Greek struggle will influence activists around the world. There needs to be both solidarity with the Greek anti-austerity movement and critical evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

All eyes on Greece!

From Detroit Workers’ Voice #116, Jan. 19, 2015

On Sunday, January 25, Greek voters will elect a new parliament. Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left) is leading in the polls. And it is committed to ending austerity.

Unemployment, wage cuts, and hopelessness is rampant in Greece. Even the medical system has collapsed, and malaria again haunts the country. Yet the European bourgeoisie and bankers are insisting that yet more workers should starve, and yet further cuts be made in social programs. All the establishment parties back austerity, including the Greek socialist party, PASOK. The workers of Greece are desperate and fed up with PASOK, whose popularity has fallen to single digits. PASOK is as bad as the Democratic Party here; it is no alternative to the present Conservative ruling party. It’s a new party, Syriza, formed in 2004, that is posing the challenge to austerity.

Syriza promises to end austerity and gradually restore the cuts. This is what the people want. But Syriza believes the European Union officials and bankers will agree to renegotiate the government debt. It hopes they can be forced to be reasonable, but when have the capitalists ever been reasonable? Besides, the relentless Eurobourgeoisie fears that if they renegotiate the Greek debt, they will have to renegotiate the Spanish, Portuguese, Irish, Italian and other debts too.

So, if Syriza wins the election with a large enough margin to form a government, a major confrontation will be in the making. Are people or interest payments to be protected? All Europe will be watching. But what will Syriza do if it can’t get other governments and the Eurobankers to go along? Will it rally the working masses in favor of more radical steps than renegotiation? Or will the Greek workers need to build a stronger party, with a clearer orientation towards the class struggle?

This is a critical moment for Greece, and for workers across Europe. Down with austerity! Support the Greek people!
**Earlier comments on Syriza**

**November 2014**

Syriza stands for ending austerity and other worthy goals, but has a problem with knowing how to achieve them. Its leader, Alexis Tsipras, puts hope in the idea of renegotiating agreements with the financiers of the European Union, but it’s unlikely that the bankers will have much sympathy for Syriza’s goals. The EU bourgeoisie has been using the crisis to force Greece to cut social programs and squeeze the working class, and it is committed to continuing down this road. But, unfortunately, Syriza does not have definite plans about what to do if it can’t get the deal it wants. Thus, as in Spain, it is a major achievement of the working class that it is seeking to build a mass anti-austerity party separate from the old parties, but Syriza is the first step, not the last, in this effort.

From: The world in struggle (part one): Belgium, Spain, Greece, and South Africa” in the DWV list, Nov. 22, 2014.  
http://www.communistvoice.org/DWV-141122.html

**June 2013**

Meanwhile the most notable figure at the convention was probably Andreas Karitzis, the representative from the Greek organization Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left - Unitary Social Front”), which is the official opposition in the Greek parliament to the servile parties of austerity. In fact, Syriza almost won the national elections of June 2012. And unlike the sell-out Greek Socialists, who are part of the pro-austerity coalition, Syriza is fighting austerity. Their representative described the history of Syriza, how it worked with the mass movements, and the brutal pressure from the bourgeoisie against them. But from the several presentations he gave, it also appears that Syriza isn’t sure what it would or could do if it does come to power. This uncertainty was a major point in the discussion about Greece. This, it seems to me, shows one aspect of the fact that, despite Karitzis’ talk of overcoming capitalism, Syriza is a reformist party. It would prefer to proceed by renegotiating the austerity deal and getting better terms. It seems to know that this isn’t likely to be possible, yet it hasn’t yet confronted the question of what radical steps would be necessary to oppose the brutal financial, economic and political pressure the European bourgeoisie would put on a Greek government that rejects austerity.

http://www.communistvoice.org/48cPlatypus.html
The present price is low, although higher than when Chavez in Venezuela, but the deals between the Chavista leadership, the military, and a section of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. It’s not the working people and the series of new cooperatives and microbusinesses that settled economic policy in Venezuela, but the deals between the Chavista leadership, the military, and a section of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. These deals were greased by oil money.

So this system depended on continued high prices for oil. The present price is low, although higher then when Chavez became president. With oil prices way below the heights where they were for a time during Chavez’s presidency, the economy has gone into deep crisis. Inflation this year is far over 100%. There are deep shortages of basic goods, from medical supplies to eggs to toilet paper. People wait hours in line for small amounts of goods with subsidized prices. The system of artificial exchange rates for the bolivar has turned into a nightmare, with the official and actual value of the Venezuelan bolivar differing by 100 times. And the Chavista movement had no serious plan about what to do in this situation.

The Venezuelan economy had long been built around oil, and this couldn’t be changed overnight. But change is necessary; “21st century socialism” can’t be petro-socialism, when oil and other fossil fuels threaten to destroy the 21st century, at least as far as human welfare is concerned. Yet underneath the loud words of Chavez and Maduro about global warming, they have championed a vast 25-year “Oil Sowing Project”, which would be the axis not only for Venezuelan development, but for regional cooperation. This is justified with the hope of prosperity for the peoples of Latin America, but oil capitalism has its own logic.

Indeed, even aside from the environmental devastation from oil, the tremendous profitability of oil production has been a mixed blessing for capitalist countries. In Venezuela, the high oil revenues covered over many problems which the Bolivarian movement ignored. Something similar has happened in other countries. In the worst cases in the middle East, the huge oil revenues of countries such as Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Syria provided the basis for long-standing dictatorships and for their territorial ambitions. It’s also been noted that oil and gas windfalls can sometimes stunt an economy. One might think that this wealth would provide funds for diversifying the rest of the economy and economic growth, but instead there is the experience of “Dutch disease”; Wikipedia says “The term was coined in 1977 by The Economist to describe the decline of the manufacturing sector in the Netherlands after the discovery of the large Groningen natural gas field in 1959.” In Venezuela, the windfall from the period of high oil prices provided social programs, but also seems to have fostered corruption and distortions in the economy. The masses benefited greatly from the increased social programs, but these programs are now in jeopardy, and would be even if the Maduro government had won the election.

The collapse of oil prices would have been a major shock for any Venezuelan government. But one might have expected that an actually socialist government, in power for over a decade and a half, would have been moving away from reliance on higher and higher prices for oil. One might have expected that the Bolivarian movement would have openly discussed the economic situation with the masses and recognized the need for improving its policies, instead of insisting that all the problems were simply the result of the fierce political struggle in Venezuela and the hostility of the

Oil, the Chavistas, and the Venezuelan elections of 2015

By Joseph Green
From the DWV list for Dec. 10, 2015

The Venezuelan legislative elections of December 6 resulted in a devastating defeat for the “United Socialist Party” of the late Hugo Chavez. The opposition has ended up with a two-thirds majority in the legislature. This is a huge setback to the Bolivarian movement created by Hugo Chavez and continued by present Nicolas Maduro.

The fall in support for the Chavistas is the result of an economic crisis in Venezuela caused in part by the collapse of oil prices. This drop has resulted in economic difficulties for many oil producing countries: not just Venezuela, but Iraq, Russia, Iran, oil emirates like Qatar, and others. Even the US economy is feeling some effects from it. But these are not socialist countries, while the Bolivarian movement of the late Hugo Chavez and of the present Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro boasted that it was implementing, not just socialism, but “21st century socialism”. Indeed, Chavez and Maduro brought some important social programs to the people, but they didn’t know how to maintain these programs or transform the Venezuelan economy. This was not socialism, but a reformed capitalism, and it was only going to go so far.

Since 1999, the Chavista government used the revenues from the sale of Venezuelan oil to finance reforms that improved the life of poor majority of Venezuelans. Education and health care was dramatically extended; malnutrition declined radically; many more people had pensions; and the percentage of people living in poverty declined sharply. This was financed mainly with oil revenues. During much of the Bolivarian period, oil prices on the world market soared, becoming several times higher than the historic lows at the time that Chavez assumed the Venezuelan presidency in 1999. It is entirely just that the Venezuelan working people should get some benefit from the oil, rather than all the profits flowing to the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. But socialism isn’t just a matter of redistributing oil revenues. It refers to the working people taking over and directing production as well as deciding the path for the country, whereas the Chavistas have presided over a mixed capitalist economy, albeit one with much better social programs than previous Venezuelan governments. Aside from cooperatives and the state-owned oil company, most production remains directed by the bourgeoisie. And although the Chavez and then Maduro governments relied on mass support from the poor for their many electoral victories, they ruled through accommodation with the military and a section of the bourgeoisie. It’s not the working people and the series of new cooperatives and microbusinesses that settled economic policy in Venezuela, but the deals between the Chavista leadership, the military, and a section of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. These deals were greased by oil money.

The collapse of oil prices would have been a major shock for any Venezuelan government. But one might have expected that an actually socialist government, in power for over a decade and a half, would have been moving away from reliance on higher and higher prices for oil. One might have expected that the Bolivarian movement would have openly discussed the economic situation with the masses and recognized the need for improving its policies, instead of insisting that all the problems were simply the result of the fierce political struggle in Venezuela and the hostility of the
American government. But the Chavistas have had a high-handed attitude to the masses from the start, priding themselves on bringing some benefits but keeping the major decisions away from them.

A difficult period is in store for Venezuela. The masses will have to fight hard to retain the social benefits they enjoyed for a time, but this will not simply be a fight to maintain the old Chavista system. At least, if the struggle is to be successful, it better not simply look towards maintaining the old system. The economic crisis is a crisis of the Chavista economic system, which was going to change even if Maduro had won the election: the money was running out. Much will depend on whether a movement gradually emerges that more truly represents the masses than the Bolivarian movement has, and which has a better idea of how to transform the Venezuelan economy. The working class will and should support reforms of all types, but it needs to put forward its own independent stand in the midst of this struggle.

### Victory! Ireland legalizes gay marriage

From the *DWV* list for May 24, 2015

On Friday, May 22, the Irish referendum to legalize gay marriage passed by a decisive margin, 62% “yes” to 38% “no”. It was “yes” from one end of the country to another, with a majority in 42 out of 43 voting districts. This put the following language into the Irish Constitution: “Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex.”

This was an important victory for Irish gay people, and it strikes a strong blow at anti-gay prejudice. It is also an important victory for the working class because gay workers generally suffer much greater indignities than rich gays, and because whenever the working class comes out against the unjust oppression of any part of the people, it increases its overall solidarity and ability to unite against the bourgeoisie.

At one time the social stands of the Republic of Ireland were dominated by the religious conservatism of the Catholic Church. But for many years, the hold of the Church has been receding. And now Ireland has joined the list of countries permitting gay marriage; it has defied the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist clergy who wanted to see a “no” vote; and it is the first country where gay marriage has been legalized by a vote of the entire population. Today the US is behind the Republic of Ireland on this issue. And it is now Northern Ireland which is also behind the Republic (previously, Northern Ireland had decriminalized homosexuality in 1982, while the South didn’t until 1993).

The referendum will have an ideological effect on the situation elsewhere in the world. Anti-gay bigotry remains a major issue in American life including elections, in the religious doctrine of various churches, and in many countries around the world. It’s part of the nationalist ideology of the expansionist “Russian World” promoted by President Putin, who regards gay people as tools of Western imperialist aggression; he has enacted anti-gay laws, which ban public support for gays, prevent gays from adopting children, and threaten gay tourists with arrest. But every victory for gay marriage around the world helps undermine anti-gay bigotry anywhere else.

At the same time, a left-wing activist from New Zealand, Philip Ferguson, while hailing the referendum victory, pointed out that it

“isn’t, however, a victory for the left. While the

Irish left campaigned vigorously for a ‘yes’ vote, so did most of the right. Big business wanted a ‘yes’ vote. The parties which have imposed utterly vicious austerity on the working class – both employed and unemployed – campaigned for a ‘yes’ vote.” (http://www.marxmail.org/msg130412.html)

That is to say, the passage of the referendum was important for left-wing activists and democratic workers, but it does not show their strength versus the right. All the parties in the Irish parliament, no matter how vicious against the working people, came out for a “yes” vote. Does this mean that the working class should have recoiled from this referendum? Not at all. It’s necessary for workers and activists to know how to participate not just in purely working class struggles, but mixed struggles. The exploiting bourgeoisie may back some just social measure for a time, but these measures are most important for the working people. The bourgeoisie opposed various measures in the past, and may again in the future whenever they interfere with its overall financial or political goals. Indeed, historically, in the Irish Free State and then Republic, the various bourgeois parties propped up Church influence for the sake of cementing their rule.

It’s a good development, not a bad one, that all the parties in the Irish parliament had to back the referendum. One should, however, not think that the decisive majority in the referendum carries over to resistance to the bourgeoisie. The Irish working class faces a protracted struggle against the disorganization that is common to the working class movement around the world. Yet the anti-austerity struggle is growing in Ireland. This can be seen in the ongoing protests against the introduction of water charges: last year and continuing this year, tens of thousands of people have repeatedly come out for demonstrations in Dublin and elsewhere against the newly-introduced water tax and the installation of water meters. The Irish people are on the move both on social issues and in economic protest, but the way these struggles develop differ.

— Joseph Green

1 The URL given in the article doesn’t seem to work anymore. But the same words from Philip Ferguson can be found at http://thestandard.org.nz/ireland-votes-for-same-sex-marriage/.
Savage Cleveland police murderer of Black child Tamir Rice excused by grand jury!

The following two articles are from Detroit Workers’ Voice #119, Jan. 18, 2016.

The white Cleveland cop who shot and killed 12-year-old Black youth Tamir Rice will not be charged. The grand jury failed to see any chargeable offense, it was announced on December 28.

The refusal of the grand jury to indict the police shows that the problem is not just a matter of a few bad cops. It is an institutional problem. White supremacist racist savagery is built into the American judicial system; it is a continuation, in another form, of slavery. And this system, the police and courts, is a front line of defense of the rule of the rich, headed by the big capitalist exploiters, who control and finance the political system in the U.S. today.

The support that the judicial system provides to the racist actions of the police shows that the problem is not just a matter of a few bad cops. It is an institutional problem. White supremacist racist savagery is built into the American judicial system; it is a continuation, in another form, of slavery. And this system, the police and courts, is a front line of defense of the rule of the rich, headed by the big capitalist exploiters, who control and finance the political system in the U.S. today.

In the Ferguson grand jury prosecutor McCulloch employed as a central witness a woman whom his office knew to be a mentally ill liar, whom they knew had not been at the scene of the killing and whom they knew had fabricated evidence in an unrelated case.

At the same time, the Ferguson prosecutor instructed his jury that it was legal for a cop to shoot a fleeing unarmed and non-dangerous suspect, as witnesses say Wilson had done to Brown. This practice had been outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1980, but the Ferguson grand jury was guided by this outlawed law.

Only a ferocious mass struggle by Black people and all who believe in justice and freedom can limit the beastly savagery of the police and the judicial system.

Jail Gov. Snyder for poisoning 100,000 people in Flint!

The criminal Michigan Governor Rick Snyder should go to jail!

To save money, this bloodsucker had the toxic water of the Flint River piped into Flint homes and refused to add chemicals to prevent this corrosive water causing the massive leaching of lead from water pipes. Though now the system is switched back to clean Lake Huron water, it goes on leaching lead.

Tests have shown lead levels far above safe standards. The long-term health of the whole population, largely working-class, poor and 50% African American, is now severely threatened. Lead poisoning can do irreversible damage, especially to children.

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Racist savagery is an issue not just for Black people, for whom it is a matter of survival, but for the whole working class and all freedom-loving people. Elementary justice demands that we unite to end it; you cannot call yourself a moral human being and support these atrocities.

It is also a life-and-death matter for the workers as a class. For how can the workers build unity against our rich class enemies if the white workers stand aside and allow racist savages to murder Black people?

As Karl Marx wrote at the time of the Civil War, “Labor in the white skin cannot be emancipated where in the black it is branded.”

This must be the workers’ watchword.
The following article is from *Detroit Workers’ Voice* #116, Jan. 19, 2015, which was distributed at the Martin Luther King Day march and rally in Detroit. *DWV* also contained the articles “South African workers on the march”, which supports the defiance by NUMSA, the largest union in South Africa, of the ruling ANC, and “All eyes on Greece!”

ML King Day is a time to recall the brave struggle of the 1950s and 60s which brought down the cruel Jim Crow system, legal discrimination and segregation. There were more opportunities for jobs and education and more social programs started. But despite these advances, special persecution of black people by the police and the courts has persisted. And capitalist austerity has undercut economic gains.

So the struggle lives on, searching for lessons from the past and inspired by present racist outrages. There can be no comfort when police kill black people on any pretense. What peace can exist when a corrupt grand jury system frees murderous cops? Even when their crimes are caught on videotape! Michael Brown (unarmed and surrendering), Tamir Rice (12 years old playing in a park), Eric Garner (videotaped being strangled to death for allegedly illegally selling a few cigarettes), Ezell Ford (a non-threatening mentally-ill man in Los Angeles). The list of victims could go on and on. It’s a list going back through history of working class and poor people, and especially the black and Latino poor. It’s part of the plague of racial profiling and mass incarceration aimed against the worst-off victims of the capitalist economy.

**Taking the fight to the streets**

The black masses have risen in protest along with white and other non-white workers and students. They are sick of the ongoing racism of the capitalist cops and courts. They want change now, not when the supposed anti-racist politicians get around to it. Marches and rallies have spread across the country. And the movement’s tactics have increasingly disdained being confined to the polite and non-disruptive forms acceptable to the bourgeois establishment and its official “anti-racist” leaders.

On Dec. 3 the masses of New York City brought parts of the city to a halt when a grand jury freed officer Pantaleo who strangled Eric Garner. Thousands occupied the Brooklyn Bridge, Times Square and Union Square. Demonstrators poured into the main streets gathering wide approval from honking motorists. Ten days later 30,000 marched to the NYPD headquarters.

In Ferguson, MO, (near St. Louis) where Brown was gunned down, protesters confronted the police day and night. Black and white demonstrators responded angrily to police tear-gassing and mass arrests, setting some cop cars on fire.

There have been weeks of non-stop anti-racist actions in the San Francisco Bay Area. Highways were occupied, and activists have chained themselves to cars of the BART regional transport system. “die-ins” blocked streets.

High school and even grade school students have marched out of school in some cities. In the Oakland, CA area and some other major cities, groups are following police on foot, tracking and recording their behavior despite police objections.

On Dec. 31, a crowd of protesters active in Ferguson poured through the doors of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department declaring they were serving an eviction notice and removing the police from power because of their brutality and their role as a “militarized occupation force...complicit in mass incarceration of black and brown citizens... [and] imposing blight on our communities under the guise of protecting and serving.”

Rather than bow to the authorities, activists have increasingly found tactics to turn up the heat on the cops, courts and politicians.

**Class politics and the anti-racist struggle**

It’s natural the bourgeoisie isn’t pleased when the masses fail to crawl before their every command. The banks, the corporations and other wealthy live off the misery of the workers and poor. Both Republicans and Democrats serve the capitalists. The justice system does too. This system as a whole is behind the murders, not just random police thugs. Even the liberal capitalist politicians are not immune.

The liberal Mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, is an example. He is white with a black wife and taken some measures against police racial profiling. But he has never given up support for the “broken windows” policy which was directly responsible for the death of Eric Garner who was strangled for allegedly selling some loose cigarettes. “Broken windows” began under reactionary Republican mayor Rudolph Giuliani and continued under conservative billionaire Bloomberg.

Why does de Blasio cling to it? The idea behind the policy was to cut crime by arresting poor folk for any petty crime they committed or may commit rather than provide jobs and better living conditions that would reduce crime. It’s a banner for capitalist austerity, one which makes politicians of both parties salute for fear of offending the corporate bosses.

**Beyond the black bourgeoisie**

If the fight against racism is confined to what is acceptable to the predominately white bourgeoisie it will suffocate. Obama’s presidency is the best example. He carries out austerity measures rather than providing jobs and social programs that would help black workers and poor. He set the one year record for deporting Mexican immigrants. Rev. Al Sharpton and much of the black bourgeoisie nonetheless stand beside Obama or other Democrats like de Blasio.

The masses are the life of the recent protests. But the black bourgeoisie would channel that energy into support for pro-capitalist politics that subverts anti-racism. Organize new mass organizations, unconcerned with limiting themselves to what the capitalists want. Fight the racist system!
May Day 2015

Leaflet of the Seattle Communist Study Group on April 23, 2015 calling on people to take part in the local May Day events.

On May 1, 1886 U.S. workers rose in the powerful general strike for an 8-hour day that is today celebrated by class-conscious workers throughout the world. Their action laid bare that in America too, modern society is split into two hostile, warring camps. On one side stood the producers of society’s wealth: the working class in its millions. On the other side stood the owners of the means of production, the parasitical capitalist class—backed by their police, national guard, politicians and press.

Today the class division revealed by the first May Day has further widened. The capitalists (the so-called 1%) are celebrating new highs on the stock market. Politics are dominated by two parties of the super rich. And the police forces are increasingly being militarized in order to suppress mass resistance and rebellion. But on the other side the working class struggle remains at a very low level. The result is that the new generations of workers and youth face worse and worse futures than their parents. The only way out of this gloomy situation is to politically reorganize the working class for struggle, beginning from where we are.

The strike movement and Fight for $15

In defiance of police repression, over the past years the workers of China have been going out in record numbers of strikes and “incidents,” resulting in rising wages. But in the United States the number of strikes remains at record lows, and wages have either stagnated or dramatically fallen. Additionally, the number of private sector workers even in unions has fallen to 6.6%, and the leaders of the AFL-CIO and CTW generally oppose strikes, or work to weaken and sell them out if they occur. This reality drives home the need for workers to organize unions where they do not exist as well as to organize themselves independently of the union hierarchy in order to fight for strikes and other class-struggle policies where unions exist. And there’s a certain motion in this direction.

On April 15 tens of thousands of low-wage workers – who are disproportionately national minorities and immigrants – took to the streets demanding “$15 and a union.” This movement has extremely wide support among all workers, and it has led to the raising of the minimum wage in a number of cities and states during the past two years. But reliance on SEIU-led publicity walk-outs is not enough. In fact, in Seattle, where the minimum wage was already one of the highest in the country, the SEIU cut a deal with the local establishment in which the minimum remains at $11 this year, and, depending on how an employer is classified, does not reach $15 an hour for several more years. Moreover, $15 an hour is still not a living wage. To win that is going to require organizing in the workplaces, including strikes that shut down production and hurt the profits of the exploiters.

An example from low-wage workers in Mexico

Beginning March 17, tens of thousands of Mexican agricultural workers stayed out of the fields to launch a powerful strike in Baja California. Many were Indigenous people from the southern states, who had not received a raise in 20 years. And they had to strike under the auspices of an independent union because the unions which supposedly represent them are completely sold out. Hundreds of police and soldiers were called out to break up the strikers’ blockades and they suffered more than 200 arrests. But with their crops rotting, the big growers agreed to a 15% wage increase. This is less than what the workers were demanding, but they’ve now gained experience in fighting, and more confidence about using their collective power in future harvests.

Another important movement: Black Lives Matter!

Police killings are the highest in 20 years – about 1,100 last year. These shootings are often cold-blooded murders, with victims being repeatedly shot, including being repeatedly shot in the back or while their hands are raised or while they lay bleeding on the ground. Or people are savagely beaten and then killed by gangs of cops having sadistic “fun,” e.g. Freddie Gray in Baltimore.

But the anger in the land against these atrocities has given rise to riots and mass demonstrations with each new police murder or publicized beating, and to the Black Lives Matter movement. Obama wants to side-track this movement by suggesting society in general is the source of the problem. But no! The murderers are the armed representatives of the capitalist state, and they’re acting out the racist and class hatreds of the ruling class toward those whom it exploits and oppresses. And those being murdered are nearly always from the working class, and disproportionately national minorities and immigrants (e.g., Antonio Zambrano-Montes of Pasco).

Full rights for all immigrants!

The capitalist class wants immigrant workers, but it wants them slaving without rights and under threat of deportation so as to be able to super-exploit their labor-power, which they then use to drive down the wages and conditions of all workers. Thus, the demand of the working class must be for full rights for all immigrants, whether they have papers or not.

A lesson about the Democrats

In 2006, after huge numbers of immigrants poured into the streets protesting Bush’s proposal to make undocumented immigrants felons, Bush abandoned that idea while continuing to support reactionary legislation. But the legislation proposed by the Democrats was also reactionary, and the leaders of the mainstream immigrant rights groups plus SEIU and other
unions hid this from the immigrant rights movement in order to help get Obama elected as a supposed friend. Some of these groups also supported the reactionary bills! Well, the truth is now out: Over the past 7 years the Democrats’ “comprehensive immigration reform” bills have not been radically different from those of the Republicans. They always put “border security and interior enforcement” first. They included fines, fees, and sometimes 20 years of legal red tape before you could get citizenship. They contained bracero-like programs to serve agribusiness, “English proficiency” requirements, favoritism for highly educated immigrants in a few industries, etc. And, meanwhile, the Obama administration set new records in deportations.

Now, when the Democrats are worried about getting immigrant votes next year, Obama has made an executive order (which has been held up by court challenges and can be overturned by the next president) temporarily exempting a minority of undocumented immigrants (est. 3.7 million) from deportation if they can prove they’ve been in the U.S. for over 5 years and have children and “roots” here. So while they pay taxes and will have temporary papers, these people will continue to be denied full rights, and the majority of undocumented migrants will still have no rights. Thus, the immigrant rights movement must stick to its demands for full rights for all.

May Day as a revolutionary holiday

In 1886 it was the class-conscious activists who were the most capable and successful leaders of the eight hour movement. They fought for the eight hour day as part of the all round struggle against the capitalist class, attempting to use the eight hour day fight as a lever to build up the workers’ revolutionary movement. So it should be today with the “fight for $15,” immigrants rights, “Black lives matter,” environmental and other progressive movements. Class conscious activists within these movements should unite in work to give them greater strength; while as we fight the effects of the capitalist system – mass impoverishment while the rich get richer, super-exploitation and denial of rights to immigrants, racial discrimination and police murder – we should at the same time be building a movement consciously aimed at overthrowing capitalism itself in a socialist revolution that ultimately ends the division of society into exploited and exploiting classes.

Seattle May Day events:
Friday, May 1, 2015
International Workers’ Day Rally & March:
2150 S. Norman St. (Judkins Park)
March departs at 3:00 p.m.
Sponsored by El Comite and May 1st Action Coalition
Also: Anti-Capitalist March: 6:00 p.m. at Seattle Central Community College (1701 Broadway)

- Seattle Communist Study Group, seattle.com.sg@gmail.com
(PDF at www.communistvoice.org/Sea150423.pdf)
Marxism and Science

by Pete Brown, Communist Voice Organization
From the DWV list of Feb. 21, 2015

Creationists and Beginningists
Booth In the Dark
Ignoring Facts ...
... While Spouting “Infinity”

Marxism is a science and is supportive of modern science. Young Marx said “the point is not to understand the world, but to change it.” But to change the world you have to understand it, not only the present but also the past. And you have to understand the mechanisms of change. To change the world politically requires understanding basic mechanisms of the physical and biological as well as the political realms. To get people to understand the need to confront global warming, for example, we need to be able to explain some geologic, chemical and biological facts, as well as understanding how political change can occur. Marxists, focused on the future development of humanity, have always been interested in keeping up with the latest developments in natural science.

The International Marxist Tendency is an originally British group that publishes historical and theoretical articles. Their website In Defense of Marxism (url: Marxist.com) purports to address a variety of issues, among them physics and cosmology. One of their main writers is Adam Booth, who founded a Marxist study circle at Cambridge and has written extensively on economics and scientific issues. Booth’s series of articles on cosmology appeared on the IMT website beginning on November, 17, 2014. Entitled “The Crisis of Cosmology”, this series is a broadside attack on present-day cosmology and an attempt to substitute Marxist-sounding rhetoric for science. This is a completely mistaken approach to how Marxists should approach science and scientific debates.

Marx and Engels were materialists who enthusiastically but critically accepted the core of the natural science of their day. They embraced the latest scientific achievements and promoted the advances made by Darwin and Morgan among others. Booth tries to put himself in the Marxist tradition by criticizing contemporary cosmology and doing so with the help of quotations from Engels. But in the process he puts himself at odds with the scientific attitude of Marx and Engels. If contemporary cosmology were a pseudo-science and its practitioners nothing but charlatans, Booth would have a point. It’s all very well to criticize some wild speculation, but today’s cosmologists have actually discovered new, important facts about the universe, facts ignored by Booth.

Creationists and Beginningists

Throughout his series of articles, Booth sneeringly compares cosmologists to creationists who believe that the universe had a beginning via creation by a supernatural god. This is a rotten way of arguing, but it’s endemic with Booth. You don’t accomplish anything, logically, by casting aspersions, but Booth hopes that by doing so he’ll be able to accomplish indirectly what he couldn’t do directly. The fact is, scientific cosmologists do not write papers about the mechanisms of creation, how some god created the natural world. What they are doing, instead, is trying to trace the history of the universe to its beginnings and give naturalistic explanations for this history. In its approach and method, scientific cosmology is directly opposed to religious creationism. Cosmologists do not quote scripture to try and prove their theories, nor do they try to establish ritual or enforce moral laws according to their theories.

There’s no doubt some cosmologists are “beginningists”, that is, they believe that the universe had a definite beginning 13.8 billion years ago in a big bang. That is the scientific orthodoxy accepted today. But there’s considerable debate about exactly what was involved in the big bang, and there is ongoing research devoted to how that event unfolded, whether it involved “inflation” or not. And some cosmologists try to go further and look beyond the big bang, to what happened “before” it (if events prior to the movement of physical particles in space and time can be called “before”); so they wouldn’t properly be called “beginningists.” Nonetheless, one thing is clear: just because someone is a beginningist does not make him a creationist.

That doesn’t mean there are no religious people among cosmologists. There probably are people who work at scientific cosmology during the week and go to church on Sunday, worshipping a creationist god, and see some connection between the two. And some religions, e.g. the Catholic Church, try to make use of scientific cosmology, asserting that the establishment of big bang theory somehow proves or supports their creationist myth. Well, that is their business as they try to keep their religion relevant to the modern world. But the fact that the Church eventually accepted the heliocentric theory of

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1IMT was founded by Ted Grant and his followers after their break with the Committee for a Workers International in the early 1990s. Their website is edited by Alan Woods. Originally called Militant Tendency, this Trotskyist group had “entryism” as their strategy for infiltrating the Labour Party, but they were eventually tracked down and expelled from the Labour Party by Neil Kinnock in the 1980s. Grant continued to insist on “entryism” even while many of his former colleagues split off and formed other groups. Spreading from Britain to other countries, IMT has attracted significant groups in Venezuela, Brazil and Greece, where two of its members were elected to the central committee of Syriza at its founding congress in July 2013. Like other Trotskyist groups, IMT has been beset by many splits, for example by its Iranian comrades angrily splitting from IMT’s support for Hugo Chavez and his closeness to Iran. In the U.S., IMT supporters do not support entryism into the Democratic Party but support a Labor Party based on the trade unions.

2Adam Booth founded an IMT group at Cambridge University, which has become fairly strong there by supporting the fight against austerity. Booth writes against Keynesianism and reformism as well as articles on scientific topics.
the solar system did not invalidate that theory. It doesn’t mean that anyone who accepts heliocentrism is an agent of the Vatican trying to subvert physical science.

Some of the more careful cosmologists shy away from absolute beginningism and only talk about what they know for sure. For example, Steven Weinberg in his 1977 book The First Three Minutes pushes things back to within seconds of the big bang but doesn’t try to go beyond that. Weinberg explains how particle physics explains what happened in the early universe, how particles eventually combined into atoms and eventually gave rise to the elements we know today. This is a good example of how research in one field (particle physics concerning ultra-small things) can be used to explain events in another, entirely different field (the universe as a whole, the ultra-big). But Weinberg does not try to speculate about what happened before that, about exactly what the big bang was or what set it off. He’s careful not to speculate about absolute beginnings; nonetheless, because he accepts some basic tenets of big bang theory, he would be called a “creationist” by Booth. This is an anti-scientific way of acting that has nothing in common with Marxism.

Booth In the Dark

Booth likes to ridicule cosmologists for talking about dark matter and dark energy. But the scientific community has accumulated considerable evidence for these things in recent years. As to dark matter, the motion of stars and galaxies tells us what kind of gravitational fields they exert on neighboring bodies, and measurements of these indicate there are massive gravitational fields around galaxies that far exceed what could be generated by the total mass of ordinary matter contained in those galaxies. There must be something else there, inside or around the galaxies, which has mass and exerts gravitational force. Easy methods of detection – light from glowing objects or reflections – don’t detect this kind of matter, so it’s reasonable to call this “dark” matter. But just because it’s dark doesn’t mean it’s not there.

Booth says this kind of matter has not actually been detected, but this is just throwing away our knowledge of gravity, mass, estimates of mass density, etc. It’s not like these estimates could be slightly off, and correcting those mistakes could wipe out any theories of dark matter. No, scientists agree that the vast majority of matter in the universe is actually of this “dark” kind. Booth is wrong to say there’s no empirical evidence for dark matter; actually there is plenty of evidence, it’s just not the direct visual kind of evidence. Efforts are underway to gather other, more direct evidence available on Earth, but it’s difficult given that dark matter is relatively inert and does not interact easily with the more familiar (to us) ordinary (baryonic) matter.

As to dark energy, this is a newer and more controversial issue in cosmology which has come about due to measurements of the rate of expansion of the universe. That the universe is expanding was pretty well established in the 1920s and 30s, but its rate of expansion was unknown and was a hot topic of research and guesswork into the 1990s. In his 1977 book – and also in the updated version of 1993 – Steven Weinberg argues against any dark energy, asserting that the universe’s expansion is due only to the original big bang.

Weinberg thought gravity would act as a braking force eventually slowing this expansion and perhaps leading to a future “big crunch” of the universe. Or, he said, if the rate of expansion was fast enough and the matter in the universe somewhat less dense than otherwise, the universe would keep expanding forever, with all stars and galaxies eventually drifting far apart from one another.

So the universe’s rate of expansion was an interesting and controversial topic. In the late 1990s developments in astrophysics made it possible to measure this rate more precisely, and this resulted in a surprising discovery: the rate of expansion is actually increasing! The universe is not only expanding, its expansion is accelerating over time. The braking force exerted by gravity is becoming weaker as the universe ages.

Many cosmologists, accepting this fact, have theorized that there must be some other kind of previously unknown, anti-gravity force driving expansion forward and accelerating it. They call this “dark energy.” Admittedly not much is known about it, and admittedly there are some rather far-out theories floating around cosmology circles that try to explain what this energy is and where it comes from. (Other dimensions? Other universes that interact with ours?) But even if you blow off all these theories as speculative nonsense, as Booth does, you’re still faced with facts and the need to explain the universe’s accelerating expansion. Booth doesn’t try to explain it — he doesn’t even mention it. He’s only concerned with heaping ridicule on cosmologists. But ridicule doesn’t get rid of facts.

It should be noted that this situation is not unique to contemporary cosmology. Oftentimes scientists don’t have ultimate answers to mysterious forces and originating events, but that doesn’t stop them from measuring effects and theorizing about what gives rise to them. Newton had no idea what gravity was or how it originated, but that didn’t stop him and others from measuring the effects of gravity – the speed at which balls roll down an inclined plane, for example, and how that speed accelerates; and similarly with planets revolving around the sun. Newton’s theorizing was ridiculed by critics like the idealist Bishop Berkeley, and Newton himself was bothered by the fact that his theory implied action at a distance – gravity acting simultaneously with no intervening medium. But there it is, he said, that’s how my theory works. It did fit the facts and provided a satisfactory explanatory theory for over 150 years.

Similarly with dark matter and dark energy. We don’t know exactly what they are or where they came from. But we can measure some of their effects and can theorize about what produces those effects. Some of those theories, admittedly, are more reasonable than others. But admitting that doesn’t mean dismissing the facts or getting cynical about any cosmology.

Ignoring Facts ...

Booth doesn’t concern himself with facts. Whether the universe is expanding or contracting doesn’t concern him, and he doesn’t bother trying to find any theory to explain anything. He’s only interested in ridiculing scientists and even mathematicians, who, he says, “have sought to banish infinity at every step” (a ridiculous statement if there ever was one). Booth dismisses the exciting new developments in cosmology
in toto, saying nothing has advanced in the last few decades. This isn’t surprising coming from someone who ignores the discovery of accelerated expansion of the universe, who never mentions black holes (which are relativistic singularities somewhat similar in that way to the big bang), and who – unbelievably – never mentions the cosmic microwave background, which is generally taken to be solid empirical proof for the big bang. Recognition of the microwave background is not a new or controversial theory of speculative cosmologists; it was discovered half a century ago and since then has been generally accepted as leftover radiation from the big bang. Booth doesn’t bother trying to explain away these facts; he just ignores them.

... While Spouting “Infinity”

Booth dismisses modern cosmology with the magic word “infinity” which he repeats ad nauseam and quotes Engels for his authority. Because Engels, 135 years ago, made some statements about the universe being infinite, Booth feels justified in ridiculing cosmologists of today and dismissing commonly known facts. This is just the kind of anti-scientific, anti-materialist attitude that would have horrified Marx and Engels.

In the 1870s Engels wrote Anti-Duhring against the scientific pretensions of Herr Eugen Duhring. Besides erecting his own version of economics, Duhring also pretended to answer questions about science and in particular cosmology. He postulated that the universe began in an original self-identical, unchanging state of pure being without change, from which the universe that we know was derived somehow. Engels correctly ridiculed this as Hegelian idealism and insisted on the contemporary Newtonian conception of the universe. As he said: “Eternity in time, infinity in space, signify from the start ... that there is no end in any direction, neither forwards nor backwards, upwards or downwards, to the right or to the left. This infinity is something quite different from that of an infinite series, for the latter always starts from one, with a first term.”

Booth takes such quotes from Engels as a refutation of modern cosmology, which traces the universe back to a “first term”, the big bang. He goes so far as to accuse cosmologists of postulating an original state of pure being or stasis, Being without Change, as Duhring did. This is a classic red herring, as cosmologists do not postulate any such thing. Relativity theory seems to imply that the big bang came out of (or was) a singularity, a state beyond the reach of presently known physical laws, an infinitely small, infinitely dense, infinitely hot, infinitely energetic state. What to make of that, exactly, is hard to fathom, which is why Weinberg (among others) doesn’t even try. A satisfactory answer will have to await further research, further discoveries, and probably some radical readjustments to contemporary relativity and quantum theory. This is admitted by everyone, especially by cosmologists who try to answer what came “before” the big bang or what set it off.

Engels accepted his day’s Newtonian conception of the universe, a universe that was eternal and infinite in all directions, spatially and temporally. But this conception changed with the advent of relativity theory and discovery of the expanding universe. These discoveries ushered in the era of modern cosmology, which attempts to construct a history of the universe beginning as far back as possible and predicting the future as far as possible. This history does not remain satisfied with Newtonian conceptions but uses the latest advances in quantum theory, particle physics and astrophysics to expand our knowledge of how the universe has changed. Ridiculing this attempt by cosmologists is not the way to assist science, nor does it reflect credit on Marxism.

On the struggle against fascism in World War II

by Joseph Green
From the DWV list for May 10, 2015

In the US, Victory in Europe Day is commemorated on May 8. Russia celebrates Victory Day on May 9. Either way, it is a commemoration of the defeat of one of the most vicious powers that ever arose in world history, Nazi Germany.

The fascist Axis powers of World War II were a threat to everyone living on the earth. Their defeat was crucial. And the victory over the Axis powers gave a tremendous impetus to progressive struggles around the world. Among other things, this victory accelerated the national liberation movement in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. And yet, this same national liberation movement fought against some of the victorious governments of World War II. It fought against British, French, and US imperialism in many bloody and protracted confrontations that sometimes won and sometimes lost.

There is a tremendous gulf between the people who heroically fought fascism, and the imperialist motives of the governments. Many more examples could be given. The Western imperialist Allies not only tried to maintain colonialism, but they betrayed the left-wing resistance movements that had sprung up in Europe against the fascists.

And the same thing happened on the Eastern Front in Europe. The Soviet Union was one of the Allied powers. The sacrifice of the Soviet peoples against fascism will never be forgotten. They bore the brunt of assault by the bulk of the Nazi armies. Millions upon millions of Soviet working people died in this struggle, and they helped save the world. But the Stalinist government stained the anti-fascist banner.

There was the Katyn massacre of over 20,000 Poles in 1940 by the Soviet government; this was a major crime and an embarrassment to the anti-fascist cause. During the war, there was also the mass deportation in 1944 of all Chechens from Chechnya, of all Crimean Tatars from Crimea, and of a number of other small nationalities from their lands. No Chechens were left in Chechnya, or Tatars in Crimea, and return didn’t start until well after Stalin died. Back in World War II, Red Army soldiers of these nationalities, soldiers who had fought fascism, might return home only to find their families gone, and they themselves would be deported. There was also the extensive rape of women by the Soviet army during the occupation of its sector of Germany, and to some extent elsewhere in Europe.

Many more examples could be given. The Soviet government had betrayed the Russian revolution and Marxism long before World War II; it had become the government of a new bourgeoisie; and this could be seen in the way it acted during the war.

The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, but today the Russian government is saying that it bears the banner of anti-fascism and deserves to have a sphere of influence that includes any country that was in the old Soviet Union. It has been shouting about this louder and louder as its interventions in Ukraine. It says that anti-fascism is peculiarly Russian, and that its neighbors such as the Ukrainians are fascists. What a lie! The Ukrainian people fought against the fascists as did the Russian people. There are good and bad class trends in all countries: anti-fascism isn’t a matter of being Russian. The Putin government in Russia talks about being anti-fascist, but after annexing Crimea, it began oppressing the Crimean Tatars again (those who were able to return to Crimea). It denigrates the right to self-determination to Ukraine, although that was supposedly guaranteed in the Soviet Constitution. It makes a mockery of the democratic rights of the Russian people. And Putin makes deals with fascist forces across Europe, such as with Le Pen’s infamous National Front in France.

Let’s remember the sacrifice made by millions upon millions of people in the struggle against fascism in World War II, a struggle that not only took place in Europe but in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. But let’s also remember that both the Western capitalist governments and the Soviet state-capitalist government carried out their own imperialist plans under cover of this war. If we are going to carry forward the anti-fascist banner today, it would help to be clear about what happened in the past. We need a class perspective on why World War II occurred, on what happened in this war, and on what the different class forces did. We need to remember: the working people fought fascism, and they fought it for the sake of freedom, but the Allied governments fought the Axis with different goals from that of the working people.

We must keep the legacy of anti-fascist struggle alive and vigorous; this means supporting today all peoples who fight for freedom and the right to self-determination against dictatorial regimes or occupiers. We must not allow the symbols of the struggle in World War II to be used against the anti-fascist and liberation struggles of today. We must not forget about what the Western governments did after defeating the Axis, and we must not forget what the Soviet government did either.
From Baba to Tovarishch
(From hag to comrade)

From the DWV list for Nov. 5, 2015

The book From Baba to Tovarishch: The Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet Women’s Struggle for Liberation was published by the Chicago Workers’ Voice group in 1994. It’s been hard to obtain for some time, and I am pleased to announce that it’s now freely available for downloading in its entirety at www.marxists.org/historv/erol/ncm-7/baba.pdf. Based on research that was begun in 1990 by several comrades as part of the theoretical work of the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA (1980-1993), its overall author is the late comrade Barbara Ranes. After the dissolution of the MLP, the CWF group continued communist work for several years. The Communist Voice Organization, which also stems back to the MLP, continues anti-revisionist communist work to this day. Below are the Foreword, Table of Contents, and excerpts from the List of Terms for this major work about the relationship of the women’s movement and the overall building of the revolutionary party and society. – Joseph Green

Foreword to From Baba to Tovarishch

The articles in this book were prepared by members of a study group on women which was formed in 1990. This study group was organized by the Marxist-Leninist Party, and several of these articles originally appeared in the Workers’ Advocate Supplement, a journal of the MLP. The articles have been edited and expanded for publication in this book.

The Marxist-Leninist Party has since dissolved – in November, 1993. The MLP stood for socialism, and for building an independent working class movement. One of the historic strengths of the Marxist-Leninist Party was its opposition to the betrayal of Marxism-Leninism that took place in the Soviet Union. In fact, the MLP and its predecessors saw themselves as anti-revisionist communists who opposed the bureaucratic state capitalist regime in the Soviet Union and its reactionary theories and tactics. The MLP worked to develop a critique of Soviet state capitalism and to rescue socialist theory and practice from years of distortion brought on by the Soviet-style ‘communist’ parties, which had wide influence on the mass movements around the world. Today, the USSR doesn’t exist. We were not surprised when economic and political crises brought down the Soviet system.

Developing this critique of Soviet revisionism was one of the issues which inspired our work on women.

The MLP came out of the mass struggles of the 1960s and ’70s. It tried to break the reformist hold over the mass movements and to organize working people as a class for themselves. The MLP fought against the influence of the Democratic Party in the mass movement. It opposed the trade union bureaucrats for holding back the workers’ struggles. It opposed the revisionist and Trotskyist policies which attempt to tie the mass struggles to reformism.

The members of the study group have had many years of experience working to build a revolutionary movement. At the time the study group was formed, the MLP was actively working to build the pro-choice and clinic defense movements. It tried to develop more militant tactics by exposing the role of bourgeois feminism in the movement, and by broadening the perspective to focus on the concerns of working class, poor, and minority women.

The MLP was very aware of the conditions of women in the capitalist world of the 1980s and ’90s. In the US., women made on average only 67% of the wages of men, poverty among women and children is rising, and there is an epidemic of violence against women. In many countries such as Japan, for example, violence against women is still hardly talked about. There is the widespread practice of genital mutilation of young girls in many African and some Asian countries, the murder of women for their dowries in India, the infanticide of female children in many countries, and the rise of fundamentalist religious attacks on women in Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Bangladesh, and other countries. We could go on and on.

Our awareness of the condition of women throughout the world, and our (often frustrating) experience in the women’s movement today was another current which led to our research on Soviet women under the Bolsheviks.

In our research, the study group reviewed the works of such major socialist theorists as Marx, Engels and Lenin, who wrote on the issues of women’s oppression and how to end it. As well, we studied the works of other socialist leaders to whom the liberation of women was a major concern, such as August Bebel, Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai. We wanted to have a better grasp of the views and experiences of the socialist struggle to liberate women. We also investigated certain questions of anthropology in order to better understand the historical basis for women’s oppression.

We are informed of the controversies surrounding Engels and his use of Morgan’s work. In the end, we found these criticisms to be insignificant in regard to the basic conclusions of our book. We are also aware of the many feminist analyses of the Marxist position regarding women which have been written over the last twenty years. We found that most of these critiques were based on a false interpretation of Soviet history as “socialism”, and not on a correct analysis of its history as a failed attempt to create socialism that resulted in a repressive state capitalism.

We make the assertion that there has been no better blueprint for women’s emancipation than that of Marxism-Leninism. It is our contention that fighting for women’s liberation is closely linked to fighting the economic system of capitalism which maintains the oppression of women and that, conversely, socialism cannot be achieved without emancipating women.

Our study and discussion focused on the history of the struggle for women’s liberation prior to and after the October Revolution.
1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The October Revolution brought to power the first proletarian regime to endure for more than a brief time. The fight of women against their oppression was a strong current of this Revolution, and the victory of 1917 opened up an even broader fight. The struggle for women’s liberation was intimately connected with the advances, as well as the failures, of the Bolshevik Revolution. It is our view that the revolutionary socialist movement in the Soviet Union was betrayed, that eventually the Communist Party and the Soviet state lost all of their revolutionary character and became an entrenched state capitalist bureaucracy. One of the factors revealing this betrayal was the abandonment of the struggle for the liberation of women.

In our opinion, activists committed to women’s emancipation should seriously look into the Soviet Union, a story which provides valuable lessons for the struggles of today. Our study on women has given us a better grasp of the long-term issues involved in building a progressive women’s movement in this country.

In this book, we examine the history of the struggle for women’s liberation in the Soviet Union in detail, concentrating on the period from 1917 through the middle 1930’s. We investigate the Bolshevik goals for the liberation of women, the struggles of the women themselves, the policies of the Soviet government and the Communist Party, and the turn away from socialism, which undermined the progress of women’s liberation and justified the exploitation of women anew. ...

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**From “List of Terms”**

Baba: Diminutive of “grandmother” (babushka). A derogatory term applied to women, implying something like “ignorant old hag”.

Delegatki: Working and peasant women delegated by their constituency to serve several months as apprentices in governmental agencies. Program run by Zhenotdel.


Robotnitsa: Literally “The Woman Worker”. Bolshevik women’s magazine.

Tovarishch: “Comrade” (same form for male and female).

Zhenotdel: Women’s Section of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the CPSU(b), 1919-1930.

Zhensektor: Women’s Sector; successors of local Zhenotdels.

Zhensovet: Women’s Councils established in rural areas in 1950s.
From the failed legacy of Leon Trotsky

The sad story of Leon Trotsky and Haile Selassie – part one

by Joseph Green
From the DWV list for August 31, 2015

This month marks the 75th anniversary of the vicious, criminal murder of Trotsky on August 21, 1940, carried out at the behest of Stalin. This has encouraged a flurry of interest in the new articles and books that continue to come out about Trotsky.

Trotsky was one of the prominent members of the Bolsheviks, and he also stood up against Stalin and was murdered for it. But his theorizing was flawed, and he never repudiated the essence of Stalinism. This is the reason why, over the years, the Trotskyist movement has made one horrible mistake after another.

One example of how this happened is the story of Trotsky’s extravagant praise of Haile Selassie. This might seem like a dusty old topic. But it’s a live topic in Trotskyist circles, and it affects major issues of recent times, such as the attitude to the Taliban and the conception of anti-imperialism. So let’s look into it.

Selassie was one of the absolute rulers of the Ethiopian Empire; he was Regent from 1916 to 1930, and Emperor from 1930 to 1974. Trotsky was right to back Ethiopia against Italian invasion and occupation during the latter 1930s, but wrong to prettify Selassie’s absolutism and wrong to regard Ethiopia as a blank slate, without significant internal struggles. On April 22, 1936, Trotsky wrote that workers faced “making a choice between two dictators”, either Mussolini or Haile Selassie. He didn’t look towards the victory of the Ethiopian people, but the “victory of the Negus”; “Negus” referred to Haile Selassie, and Trotsky was saying something like “victory of his royal majesty”. Trotsky held that “the victory of the Negus ... would mean a mighty blow not only at Italian imperialism but at imperialism as a whole, and would lend a powerful impulsion to the rebellious forces of the oppressed peoples.”

Trotsky also suggested that Selassie would play a role like major figures of the past bourgeois revolutions in England and France. However, on May 2, 1936, a mere week and a half after Trotsky described him as a powerful leader whose defeat of Italian imperialism might “play a very progressive role in history”, Selassie fled Ethiopia. Oops. The imperial regime was crumbling in the face of Italian advances. The resistance to Italian occupation would not be led by Selassie but, instead, turn into a partisan war against Italian occupation, led mainly by a movement called the Patriots. It was a forerunner in the Horn of Africa of the more well-known resistance movements in Europe in World War II. Moreover, the Patriots wanted not only to throw out the Italian fascists, but to achieve reforms in the Ethiopian regime. (Selassie returned to Ethiopia in 1941 with the help of British imperialist bayonets; the Italian fascists were thrown out, but hopes for reform in the Ethiopian regime were dashed.)

This makes a mockery of what Trotsky wrote about Selassie. Errors and wrong predictions can be corrected, but Trotsky refused to do so. Moreover, to this day, the Trotskyist movement continues to close its eyes to what really happened in Ethiopia. It hides the fact that Selassie fled Ethiopia. Instead it insists on regarding Trotsky’s comments on Selassie as the gold standard of anti-imperialism.

As a result, Trotskyist errors kept getting worse and worse. At least Trotsky was on the right side of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict. This was not a war in which workers should have opposed both sides, but one in which it was crucial to back the Ethiopian side. But some Trotskyist groups have backed Saddam Hussein or the Taliban as anti-imperialist fighters. These Trotskyists couldn’t understand how to oppose both Saddam Hussein and US imperialism, or both the Taliban and US imperialism. And some Trotskyists have denigrated popular movements against reactionary regimes, such as those against Qaddafi or Assad.

To do so, they have cited various Trotskyist dogmas, including Trotsky’s idea of Selassie’s anti-imperialist role. Yet, for example, to prettify the Taliban is to betray the Afghan people, and it is a repudiation of everything the left should stand for. It’s astonishing that some Trotskyists, such as the Workers World Party in the US or the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, could sink to this level. But so they have. I wrote a two-part article in 2002 about the struggle among Trotskyists over whether to support the Taliban. It dealt with the debate among British Trotskyists on this issue, as it was more open and informative than what appeared in Workers World. In this debate, the issue of Trotsky’s stand on Haile Selassie was raised.

See “The socialist debate on the Taliban” (January and June 2002):

Part one (http://www.communistvoice.org/28cTaliban.html) gives an analysis of the opposing views of Bob Pitt and Ian Donovan on the Taliban, both of whom refer to Trotsky’s view of Selassie. Their articles are appended there as important reference material.

Part two (http://www.communistvoice.org/29cEmir.html) contrasts Leninist view of anti-imperialism with Stalin’s view about the Emir of Afghanistan and Trotsky’s view about Haile Selassie. Trotsky’s views about Haile Selassie echo those of Stalin about the Emir.

Well, it’s been 79 years since Selassie fled Ethiopia in 1936. But the Trotskyist movement is still silent about this. It is astonishing to see one Trotskyist article after another that discusses Trotsky’s stand on Selassie, and fails to mention that Selassie fled. For example, an article in 2006 in Socialist Worker was devoted to discussing Trotsky’s stand on Ethiopia, and not only never mentioned that Selassie fled, but glorified his military role with a picture captioned “Emperor Haile
Selassie inspecting his troops during the invasion”. The famous three-volume biography of Trotsky by Isaac Deutcher ignored Ethiopia completely. Pathfinder Press published volume after volume of Trotsky’s writings, including the letter that praised Haile Selassie as an anti-imperialist: it footnoted this and that, but neglected to mention Selassie fleeing Ethiopia, the partisan war in Ethiopia, or what happened after Selassie returned.

Earlier this month, I raised on Louis Proyect’s Marxism list the issue of Trotsky’s glorification of Haile Selassie. Several people sought to defend Trotsky’s stand, but not one of them would address the issue that Selassie had fled, or what really happened in the resistance against Italian occupation. Instead they pretended that criticism of Trotsky’s extravagant backing of Selassie meant refusing to back the Ethiopian side of the war with Italian imperialism.

This says a lot about the Trotskyist method. It isn’t a materialist method. It doesn’t compare Trotsky’s views to the events in Ethiopia, but relies on pretending that opponents of Trotskyism are devils who don’t support the anti-imperialist struggle. Meanwhile, since the Trotskyist movement hasn’t examined the history of the struggle in Ethiopia, how can it learn from it? And doesn’t hiding for 79 years Selassie’s flight from Ethiopia mean that the Trotskyist movement is as guilty of the falsification of history as the Stalinists?

In part two, I will outline some of the events in the Ethiopian struggle against Italian invasion and occupation. This will provide background for part three [which will appear later in 2016], in which I will discuss in more detail the difference between Trotsky’s extravagant praise for Selassie and a standpoint that would have been more useful to the world working class with respect to the struggle in Ethiopia.

(For reference, the quotes from Trotsky glorifying Selassie are from “On Dictators and the Heights of Oslo: Letter to an English Comrade”, April 22, 1936. It is available in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* (1936-36), Pathfinder Press, pp. 317-320, or at https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/04/oslo.htm.)

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**From the history of Ethiopian resistance to Italian occupation**

**(The sad story of Leon Trotsky and Haile Selassie – part 2)**

From the *DWV* list for September 8, 2015

In April 1936, Trotsky envisioned that Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia, might strike “a mighty blow not only at Italian imperialism but at imperialism as a whole” and this “would lend a powerful impulsion to the rebellious forces of the oppressed peoples”.1 Things were somewhat different in the real world, rather than Trotsky’s imagination. But Trotsky never reexamined his views in light of the experience of the Ethiopian people’s struggle. Nor has the Trotskyist movement in the 79 years since 1936.

If we want to know how to fight against oppression, we need to study the history of the various struggles. Trotsky, however, taught his followers to follow certain mechanical rules no matter what experience said, and this is one of the worst parts of his legacy. Moreover, his lack of concern for the actual course of the Ethiopian struggle manifests a certain scorn for the peoples of the Horn of Africa.

Below is a brief overview of the actual course of Ethiopian resistance to Italian invasion and occupation:

* Haile Selassie ruled in an absolutist fashion over the Ethiopian Empire. This was an expansionist empire which oppressed a number of subject peoples. This would have an important effect on the course of the war and in the post-war years.
* The Second Italo-Ethiopian war began with an Italian invasion in October 1935.
* The Italian army made use of a substantial number of troops from other parts of Africa that they had colonized: Eritrea, Italian Somaliland, and Libya.

* The Italian invaders had greatly superior weaponry, but faced heavy opposition as they pushed into Ethiopia. At the end of 1935, in order to help stop the Ethiopian “Christmas offensive”, the Italians began to make use of poison gas. They would use it extensively against both troops and entire villages; there were also mass shootings of civilians.
* If the “Christmas offensive” had been successful, Ethiopian troops would pushed into Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. It would have been good to push the Italians out of their colonies, but there is no question that Selassie would have proceeded to annex these areas against their will.
* As the Ethiopian army suffered repeated defeats and lost territory, resistance developed behind Italian lines. One writer claims that “While conventional battles were raging in central and southeastern Ethiopia, Tigray, the first province to be occupied in northern Ethiopia, became the first battleground for the Patriots. They operated in small groups, not far from their respective localities. They were engaged in activities such as the ambushing of enemy troops to acquire arms and other war materials, snowballing huge rocks off mountains and cliffs when enemy convoys passed, disrupting the enemy’s communication systems by kidnapping their messengers and later cutting telephone lines, setting fire to anything under enemy control such as offices and fuel or ammunition depots by firing from long range, and harassing and killing enemy troops.”

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This resistance continued even as the conventional resistance by Selassie’s armies collapsed.

* The bulk of the Ethiopian army was defeated by May 1936, with one last general holding out until December; although the Ethiopian government did not surrender, the war is conventionally said to have ended in May (the month after Trotsky’s statement). The League of Nations ended war sanctions against Italy in July, 1936.

* Selassie fled Ethiopia on May 2, 1936, about a week and a half after Trotsky imagined that he would lead an anti-imperialist uprising against Italian aggression and all world imperialism. He took refuge in England not just because of Italian pressure, but from fear of the Oromo people, one of the oppressed peoples in Ethiopia.\(^2\) Selassie fled as the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, was about to fall. He could have retreated with his remaining troops away from the Italians, but would have had to pass through territory inhabited by the Oromo. A short time after he fled, Mussolini declared victory and the bourgeoisie took the war in Ethiopia to be over.

* Resistance continued, and Italy was never able to fully occupy Ethiopia. But the struggle now took on the form of a partisan or guerrilla war, mainly carried out by the Patriots. It was a forerunner of the partisan wars and resistance movements that would arise in occupied Europe.

* Selassie’s flight spread discontent with his absolutist regime. The defeat of the Ethiopian army, despite heroic efforts by its soldiers against superior weaponry and poison gas, caused Ethiopians to wonder why this had taken place. And Selassie’s absence resulted in disunity and disorientation among the remaining personnel of the Ethiopian regime. Thus, while Selassie appealed to the League of Nations and the British government, the resistance inside the country spread independently of his direction. Moreover, while the Patriots were not a revolutionary movement, they did not want to see the reestablishment of the former Ethiopian absolutism: they wanted to see reforms.

* The Ethiopian Empire’s oppression of various subject peoples played a bad part in the years of Italian occupation, as it had played in the Second Italo-Ethiopian war itself. The Italians made use of divide and conquer tactics, and sought to utilize the hatred and fears caused by past Ethiopian expansionism. As far as I know, Selassie never attempted to placate the subject nationalities with promises of reform. Instead the Ethiopian army castrated a number of captured Eritreans, and Selassie never gave up expansionist territorial ambitions. By comparison, the partisans in Yugoslavia in World War II pledged to respect the national rights of the various nationalities (with the unfortunate exception of the rights of the Albanian Kosovars); this was crucial for the success of the partisan war.

* Most bourgeois governments around the world recognized Italian rule over Ethiopia, either directly or tacitly. Britain, seeking an alliance with Mussolini’s Italy, was among those countries.

* Fascist Italy declared war on Britain and France in June 1940. Britain would then launch an East Africa campaign which would, by the end of 1941, throw Italy out of all its colonial possessions in the Horn of Africa and expand British colonial control.

* Trotsky was savagely murdered in August 1940, but this survey will continue on after that time. Trotsky died, but his theories remained, and have to be judged in the light of subsequent events as well as those in his lifetime.

* With the help of the East Africa Campaign, Selassie would return to Ethiopia in 1941. British troops, along with a contingent of Ethiopians loyal to Selassie and organized outside the country with the help of the British, and the Patriots inside Ethiopia, threw the Italian occupiers out. It was an important victory to end the Italian occupation. But Selassie’s absolutist rule was preserved, and the challenge posed by the Patriots was overcome. Thus the “victory of the Negus” (in Trotsky’s phrase) – that is, restoring his absolute rule – was not a blow to imperialism, but in accord with British imperialist plans. This result would have terrible results for Ethiopia and neighboring Eritrea in the post-war years.

* When Selassie returned, he was immediately concerned to prevent reform and preserve absolutist rule. He reorganized the country to maximize his power, and this quickly provoked several revolts. The most notable was the Woyane uprising in Tigray in 1943; it was suppressed with the help of the British air force. Here, too, what happened in Ethiopia was a forerunner of events later in Europe: other partisan movements also had their dreams of social progress suppressed by the Allies.

* In 1950, Ethiopia took control over its neighbor Eritrea under the guise of creating a federation with it. Thus Selassie succeeded in his efforts to replace British rule over Eritrea with Ethiopian rule. In 1962, Ethiopia dissolved the federation with Eritrea and openly annexed it. Thus the Ethiopian Empire continued on its expansionist course, and this paved the way for years and years of more war, more blood, more tragedy: the Eritrean War of Independence would last three decades.

* Around 1958, Selassie finally decided to take part in the general anti-colonial movement in Africa. He obtained a good deal of influence among newly-independent states, and when the Organization of African Unity was formed, its headquarters were located in Addis Ababa. But far from this giving a powerful impulse to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, Selassie’s main efforts were to restrain hostility to Western imperialism and to prevent condemnation of Ethiopia’s oppression of subject nationalities. Indeed, he was one of the moving forces behind the tragic idea that the right to self-determination should not apply to the affairs of independent African states.

* Haile Selassie’s dictatorial rule was overthrown by the Ethiopian people in 1974, thus ending the Empire. But the Empire’s legacy of national oppression and absolutism continued to plague the following governments. For example, the new government, the Dergue, would not grant the right to self-determination to Eritrea, and the Eritrean War of Independence would rage on to 1991, outlasting not only the Empire, but the Dergue as well.

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\(^2\) Aregawi Berhe, *Revisiting resistance in Italian-occupied Ethiopia: The Patriots’ Movement (1936-1941) and the redefinition of post-war Ethiopia.*

\(^3\) The Oromo people may be called the Galla in earlier literature.
Some excerpts from *The socialist debate over the Taliban*

**From part one**

It might seem strange that any leftist could doubt the reactionary nature of the Taliban. This ultra-fundamentalist regime springs from mujahedeen circles which were funded for over a decade by the CIA to fight a dirty war in Afghanistan in the 80s and early 90s. But since Sept. 11, there have been some groups who don’t believe that both sides in the US-Taliban war are reactionary. Instead they hold that the Taliban is carrying out an anti-imperialist struggle. ... This includes such groups as WWP in the US, the SWP in Britain, and various “left” Trotskyist groups. Some of these groups also believe that the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 ... were some sort of anti-imperialist or progressive act.

But it isn’t always easy to see what the larger groups involved in coalition-building, such as the WWP in the US and the SWP in Britain, actually believe on this question. Certainly smaller “left” Trotskyist groups may declare outright that they stand for the “military victory” of the Taliban, but the coalition-builders avoid such declarations. ... Their stand on the Taliban or the Sept. 11 attacks is mainly reflected by their opposition to slogans outright condemning these things. So often one finds that discussions about their stand degenerate into people wondering if they really say this or that, or really mean this or that.

Thus it is useful to examine an open debate on this issue. The CP of Great Britain is a party that broke away from its pro-Soviet past, although it still thinks the late Soviet Union was “bureaucratic socialism”, if not desirable socialism. Its paper, the *Weekly Worker*, has a lively correspondence section where the issue of the Taliban has been vigorously debated. While the CPGB opposes both the Taliban and Western imperialism, the *Weekly Worker* accepts letters with varying viewpoints. ... [Below] are two letters from this debate, from Trotskyists of different trends, one (Ian Donovan) arguing against the Taliban and one (Bob Pitt) arguing that anti-imperialists must desire the victory of the Taliban.

Pitt’s letter vehemently supports the Taliban, and talks of the “progressive content” of a Taliban victory. He enthusiastically compares the struggle of the Taliban to a progressive anti-colonial revolt.

He also deals with why people haven’t heard more about such pro-Taliban views. He makes it clear that groups such as the British SWP hold these views, but hide them in their mass work. He supports such secrecy ...

Pitt also makes it clear that the issue isn’t just the attitude to the Taliban, but towards the attacks of September 11. He points out that the SWP and SLP don’t want anyone to condemn the terrorist attacks of September 11. They will say things about the tragedy of September 11, but they draw the line at actually condemning it. ...

Ian Donovan, in reply, argues vigorously that one has to look at the class nature of the Taliban in particular, and of the fundamentalists in general. He looks more concretely at their general political role in the world than Pitt does, and raises many issues that Pitt sweeps under the rug.

However, despite their differences, both Donovan and Pitt, being Trotskyists, share some common assumptions. For example, they both accept Trotsky’s stand on the anti-colonial struggle. Pitt argues that this stand shows why it is correct to see the Taliban’s struggle as anti-imperialist, while Donovan argues that Trotsky was writing in a different historical situation. It doesn’t occur to them that Trotsky might have been just plain wrong on this question ...

In this respect, they debate the relevance of Trotsky’s stand concerning Ethiopia. ... Trotsky didn’t even try to deal with the class issues involved in Ethiopia. ... Moreover, it isn’t at all clear that support for Ethiopia followed from any of Trotsky’s general principles, such as “permanent revolution” or denial of “two-stage revolution”. Trotsky instead argued, in effect, that in this case, all these things should be thrown aside. Many contemporary Trotskyists take this to mean that any regime at all in any lesser country in contradiction with an imperialist country should be supported.

Ian Donovan won’t criticize Trotsky for being the source of this mechanical rule. Instead he advocates that it only applied in the days of old-style colonialism (or to any presently remaining cases of direct denial of national independence). He points out that the development of the bourgeoisie in the former colonial world, and makes a number of important observations. But he goes overboard and establishes a new mechanical rule. This rule is that a backward country should never be supported in a struggle against an imperialist power, unless it is a case of a struggle to “overthrow imperialism as a system”, which would require overthrowing the capitalist ruling classes themselves.

But what about situations such as, for example, Nicaragua resisting the U.S. -organized contra war in the 1980s? More generally, what about democratic revolutionary struggles that wouldn’t break the dependent countries free of the economic bonds of imperialism, but would nevertheless improve the social conditions and pave the way for a more extensive and organized class struggle by the proletariat? Such struggles still exist. This is not what the Taliban was doing in Afghanistan; it’s not what Iraq’s Saddam Hussein is doing; it’s not what Serbia’s Milosevic was doing. But such struggles do keep
Now, in practice, no matter what his theory, Donovan undoubtedly supported various progressive struggles in the dependent countries, such the overthrow of the dictator Somoza and resistance to the contras. But his Trotskyism gives him no consistent basis to do so.

Converting anti-imperialism into support for the Taliban

The following letter from the British Trotskyist Bob Pitt, editor of the journal What Next?, appeared in Weekly Worker #404 (Thursday, October 18, 2001), journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Ian Donovan utilises the thoroughly dubious concept of “reactionary anti-imperialism” in order to justify a ‘plague on both your houses’ attitude towards the current war being waged by US and British imperialism against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (Weekly Worker October 4). His arguments are ... based on a sectarian method which renders him incapable of understanding what is going on in the world, let alone doing anything to change it. ...

The example of Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia is far from irrelevant, given that the regime in that country – a feudal monarchy headed by the emperor Haile Selassie – was just about as “reactionary” as you could get. The leaders of the Independent Labour Party in Britain, arguing that socialists could not be for the victory of such a government, took a neutral position on the war. Trotsky’s response was withering: “If Mussolini triumphs, it means . . . the strengthening of imperialism and the discouragement of the colonial peoples in Africa and elsewhere. A victory of the Negus [Haile Selassie], however, would mean a mighty blow not only at Italian imperialism but at imperialism as a whole, and would lend a powerful impulse to the rebellious forces of the oppressed people. One must really be completely blind not to see this” (emphasis added [by Bob Pitt]).

This position, of seeing the victory of oppressed countries over their imperialist oppressors as progressive, irrespective of the political character of the political leadership in the oppressed country, was an elementary principle for Trotsky. ... Not for him the formalistic notion of “reactionary anti-imperialism”. ...

Does this mean that socialists should attempt to organise an anti-war movement around slogans such as ‘Victory to the Taliban’ or even ‘Defend Afghanistan, defeat US imperialism’? No, it doesn’t. ... [It would prevent] working with trade unionists, Labour Party members, CND supporters, Greens and others, few of whom will agree with a defencist position in relation to the Taliban forces fighting against the US.

Neither Taliban nor imperialism

Ian Donovan replies to Bob Pitt’s defence of the Taliban

Bob Pitt’s recent article, replying to my critique of much of the Stalinist and ‘orthodox’ Trotskyist left’s inability to oppose the current USA-UK ‘war against terrorism’ without becoming more or less critical cheerleaders for the reactionary ‘anti-imperialism’ of the Islamists, reflects much of the kind of capitulation to alien class ideologies that has crippled the left for decades. Incredibly, comrade Pitt — editor of the journal What Next? — considers that the very concept that any form of political movement that emerges in a backward country that claims to be opposed to imperialism, could ever conceivably be reactionary ‘thoroughly dubious’; and thereby lays the theoretical basis for his de facto position that the ‘anti-imperialist’ war of any movement in a backward country, no matter what its programme and aims, is ‘progressive’.

With this kind of outlook, it is hardly surprising that in the Kosovo war of 1999, comrade Pitt was one of those who supported the ‘victory’ of the grotesquely chauvinist, anti-Albanian Milosevic tyranny against the overwhelming majority of Kosovo’s people themselves. It will be recalled that Serb rule in Kosovo resembled nothing as much, in terms of the deprivation of all de facto citizenship rights of the majority ethnic group in a country in which they were the overwhelming majority, as the apartheid tyranny in South Africa, among the most obscene products of the colonialism comrade Pitt professes undying hatred of. ...

Bob Pitt ... quotes Leon Trotsky’s polemic against the leaders of the Independent Labour Party’s ‘plague on both your houses’ position on Mussolini’s 1934 annexation and colonisation of Haile Selassie’s Abyssinia. Yet it is quite amusing that comrade Pitt seems unable to actually read and place in elementary context, the very passage that he quotes: “If Mussolini triumphs, it means the strengthening of imperialism and the discouragement of the colonial peoples in Africa and elsewhere. A victory of the Negus, however, would ... lend a powerful impulsion to the rebellion of the oppressed people. One really must be completely blind not to see this.” (emphasis added [by Ian Donovan])

One really must be ‘completely blind’ not to be able to see the difference between the context when this was written, and the modern day. Which ‘colonial peoples’ would be encouraged to revolt against their colonial overlords by a victory of the Taliban in the current war?

Would it be the Indians? Would they be encouraged to revolt against the rule of the British Raj, by such a victory? Oops, sorry, colonial India has been ruled by its own bourgeoisie, in modern day India, Pakistan, and latterly Bangladesh, for several decades. Would it be the Arab peoples of the Middle East, encouraged to rebel against the overlordship of the British and French? Hardly! They, too, have been ruled by their own bourgeoisies for many a year. ....

Of course, comrade Pitt ... does not believe that his hopes-for victory of Islamists would encourage an uprising of the peoples of former colonies ... in the cause of a self-determination which was achieved decades earlier. What is implicit in his mis-citation of Trotsky is that the victory of the Taliban would propel the masses of the ex-colonial, underdeveloped world towards some sort of struggle against the imperialist world system itself: ie, towards its overthrow.

But this belief is actually a version of the Menshevik theory of ‘two-stage revolution’: since it is not possible to overthrow imperialism as a system without the overthrow of the very...

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ruling classes, bourgeois or in the case of Afghanistan, pre-capitalist and arguably pre-feudal, that comrade Pitt advocates that the oppressed masses should support in struggle ‘against imperialism’.

(Part one is from the Jan. 2002 issue of Communist Voice and may be read in its entirety at www.communistvoice.org/28cTaliban.html.)

From part two of
The socialist debate on the Taliban

Below are excerpts from part two showing the similarity of Stalin’s and Trotsky’s mistakes about the nature of anti-imperialism.

Stalin and the Emir of Afghanistan

We’ll start with a passage from Stalin that denies the connection between the class struggle and revolutionary anti-imperialism. This passage has been cited a couple of times by people seeking to regard the Taliban as carrying out an anti-imperialist struggle, but it was cited more often back in the 70s in debates in the communist movement about various national movements...

The passage comes from his pamphlet of 1924 entitled The Foundations of Leninism. Stalin went through a political evolution: he started as a revolutionary communist but ended up as the autocratic leader of a state-capitalist regime. Lenin died in January 1924. Although the revolutionary character of the Soviet government was already threatened, it would still be years before the Bolshevik revolution shrivelled up completely and the Soviet Union became a Stalinist state. But even here, in 1924, Stalin’s discussion of the Emir of Afghanistan tears the heart out of the Leninist stand on the colonial question.

Stalin wrote presenting the Emir as a flaming revolutionary. His reasoning was that the revolutionary nature of the Emir’s regime was independent of its internal nature: it sufficed that the Emir sought to maintain Afghan independence against the former British overlords. He wrote:

"...The revolutionary character of a national movement under the conditions of imperialist oppression does not necessarily presuppose the existence of proletarian elements in the movement, the existence of a revolutionary or a republican program of the movement, the existence of a democratic basis of the movement. The struggle that the Emir of Afghanistan is waging for the independence of Afghanistan is objectively a revolutionary struggle, despite the monarchist views of the Emir and his associates, for it weakens, disintegrates and undermines imperialism; ..." 

First, let’s recall the context that Stalin was writing in. Afghanistan had only just recovered control of its own foreign affairs a few years previously ... At the time Stalin wrote, the Emir [Amanullah] was a Westernizer who, inspired by the Kemalist regime in Turkey, sought to carry out a series of reforms .... However, his reforms met with opposition from tribal chieftains and religious conservatives. Civil war would break out in November 1928, and Amanullah stepped down in January 1929.

... But, it may be asked, how then could this quote be used to present the Taliban as anti-imperialist? The Emir was a reformer, not a fundamentalist reactionary. But the point is that Stalin brushed aside the internal situation in Afghanistan as irrelevant. The quote implied that it didn’t matter if the Afghan government was composed of revolutionaries, reformers from above like the Emir, or raving fundamentalist fanatics like the Taliban. It didn’t matter if there was an ongoing revolutionary struggle, or whether the government had any democratic features. All that mattered was that Afghanistan had just become independent and still had some contradictions with Britain. This supposedly made the Emir, “objectively”, into a revolutionary anti-imperialist ...

Stalin replaced a discussion of the class nature of the various anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements with a classification into the vast majority of countries where the national movement was revolutionary and some countries where it might be reactionary. In this conception, since the Emir wasn’t a reactionary, he must therefore have been a revolutionary. Lenin, by way of contrast, noted the variety of movements in the colonial and dependent countries: there were bourgeois-democratic movements of various types, there were liberal bourgeois in the national movement, there was the revolutionary peasant movement, there were the elements of independent proletarian parties, etc. There were forces who sought to channel the anti-imperialist movement to the benefit of local reactionaries, or to channel the movement against one imperialism into support for another imperialism. All these different type of forces could and did exist within national movements which were overall progressive movements against oppression.

... by connecting his general formulas on anti-imperialism with extravagant praise of the Emir of Afghanistan, he [Stalin] showed by example how to present an unrevolutionary stand—the separation of anti-imperialism from the class struggle—in a very revolutionary phraseology.

Trotsky and the Emperor of Ethiopia

What Amanullah, the Emir of Afghanistan, was to Stalin, Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, was to Trotsky. With his remarks on Haile Selassie, Trotsky promoted that an absolutist dictator could be an anti-imperialist hero ... Despite the bitter rivalry between Stalin and Trotsky, their basic stands on many questions were quite similar.

Trotsky’s remarks on Haile Selassie have been quite influential among Trotskyists. As we first saw in part one of this article, both Pitt and Donovan, although they take opposite stands with respect to the Taliban, draw support from Trotsky’s remarks on Haile Selassie. Trotsky’s remarks are also one of the sources of the later Trotskyist “military but not political support” for various notorious dictatorships that have been in conflict with imperialist powers, such as that of Saddam Hussein in Iraq...

Trotsky wrote an article in April 1936 denouncing some
leaders in the Independent Labor Party of England who took a hands-off attitude to the Italo-Ethiopian war. This was his main and longest article on this war. Trotsky correctly supported the Ethiopians against Italian aggression, but he phrased this as support for “the Negus” .... He didn’t refer to the difficulties that faced the Ethiopians because of the feudal conditions in Ethiopia and their subjugation to an absolute monarch, but instead completely identified the cause of the Ethiopian people with the leadership and rule of Haile Selassie....

Trotsky was so enthusiastic about the supposed “very progressive” nature of absolutist dictatorship, that he envisioned an autocrat like Haile Sēlassie leading a revolt in India against British colonialism. India, unlike Ethiopia, had a significant proletariat, substantial class movements of the toilers, and an active communist movement, which was faced with the issue of dealing with a powerful bourgeois nationalist movement. But Trotsky envisioned that the Indian revolt might be led, and in a progressive manner, by an absolutist despot. This underlines the fact that Trotsky, in this passage, utterly separated the class struggle from anti-imperialism. He converted anti-imperialism into simply supporting this or that dictator or regime.

**Donovan and the Emperor of Ethiopia**

Trotsky’s formulas have been used by Bob Pitt and other Trotskyists to claim that the Taliban was waging an anti-imperialist struggle. ... Applying this to the current situation, all that counts is that the US is an imperialist power and Afghanistan is a dependent country. Trotsky had emphasized that it didn’t matter if the regime of the dependent country was dictatorial – after all, he reasoned, the world had known revolutionary dictators before. It didn’t matter if it were fascist – Trotsky was so anxious to make this point that he imagined that the notorious Vargas dictatorship in Brazil might wage a liberating war against Britain. One didn’t have to know why the war was being fought. The war was automatically a liberating war for the dependent country—it couldn’t be, say, reactionary on both sides.

Ian Donovan opposes this talk about the anti-imperialism of the Taliban, and rightly so. But he tries to maintain as much of possible of the Trotskyist framework while so doing. And this has led Donovan into some strange positions of his own.

Donovan maintains that Trotsky’s stand on Haile Sēlassie was right ... He apparently considers that Trotsky was not just correct to back the Ethiopian struggle against Italian invasion, but to praise the anti-imperialist virtues of the Emperor of Ethiopia. He writes that

“... Sēlassie was the leader of a progressive, national struggle, despite his social origins. Sēlassie’s struggle had a democratic content, and was no different in essence from any other of the anti-colonial struggles for nationhood and independence that were characteristic of the period.”

Here Donovan identifies the Ethiopian struggle with Sēlassie. He is not just saying that Ethiopian resistance to Italian colonialism and fascism was correct and had a democratic content, despite the role of the absolutist emperor Sēlassie. Instead he seems to say that Sēlassie, “despite his social origins”, was essentially a progressive leader, and his leadership was no different from that of any of the other trends in the anti-colonial struggle. Donovan apparently regards the existence of the Ethiopian autocracy as no more significant than an individual’s “social origins”, which they might transcend in their life activity. ...

To prove why Sēlassie was worthy of support, Donovan compares him to Prussia’s Iron Chancellor, Count Otto von Bismarck, and to the Hohenzollern dynasty... From the Marxist point of view, Bismarck and the Hohenzollerns were enemies of the workers movement and not figures who should have been supported. Yet Donovan argues that Trotsky was right to support Sēlassie, because Sēlassie was like Bismarck. ...

A democratic revolution that breaks up the feudal estates doesn’t eliminate capitalism. It is a bourgeois-democratic revolution that clears the way for a faster, broader and more rapid capitalist development and a broader and more consistent class struggle. But for Donovan and most Trotskyists, the idea of the bourgeois-democratic nature of a revolution is the Menshevik theory of “two-stage revolution”; it’s “stage-ism”. They think that to support such a revolution means trailing along behind the bourgeoisie. They don’t recognize the struggle between different paths of capitalist development, or don’t see its significance. They think that thereby they are fighting reformism. But here we see that this negation of bourgeois-democratic revolution and movements ... leads Donovan to prettify Bismarck and Sēlassie.

It also leads Donovan to believe that the Islamic fundamentalists must be anti-capitalist, albeit a “reactionary anti-capitalism”. He confuses the ideology of the movement with its actual class significance. The development of capitalism is going on in such fundamentalist states as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan. ...

Now let’s return to Donovan’s argument that Trotsky’s formula about supporting a colony or semicoloncy against imperialism was correct in Trotsky’s day, but outdated today. Donovan puts forward an opposing formula – that, aside from the socialist revolution, every struggle between an imperialist country and a backward country is reactionary on both sides. He writes that:

“... it is utterly futile and pointless for the masses to support their own ruling class in a so-called war against imperialism. Any such struggle between the ruling class of a backward capitalist country that possesses state independence and the imperialists themselves cannot by definition harm a hair on the head of the imperialist world system while the ruling classes of both sides remain in power. Such wars are necessarily about matters in which the working class had no direct interest, such as territorial aggrandizement, which will be the dominant regional oppressor, or other such matters.”

Donovan’s reversed rule has a certain plausibility, because there are so many cases where other Trotskyists seek to give an

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Complete sets of the *Workers’ Advocate* and some related publications are now posted at the Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism Online

Complete sets of back issues of the *Workers’ Advocate*, the *Workers’ Advocate Supplement*, and the *Chicago Workers’ Voice Theoretical Journal* are now available at the Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism Online, which is part of the Marxist Internet Archive. These publications show the history of the trend that gave rise to the Communist Voice Organization. It shows important views that were gradually improved over time, and also views and practices that were later rejected. It is the record of a trend that was seriously devoted to building the communist movement on a new basis, and that persisted despite many unexpected zigzags and setbacks in the struggle.

Since 1994, the *Communist Voice* has continued the cause championed by the *Workers’ Advocate*, which was published for a quarter of a century from 1969 to 1993. The *Workers’ Advocate* was the journal of several organizations, the last one being the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA, which existed from 1980 to 1993. The *Workers’ Advocate*, and the organizations behind it, were dedicated to the mass struggles of the time, to basing these struggles on the working class, and to the project of re-establishing a truly communist party in the US. They were particularly devoted to such things as developing workplace agitation independent of the class-collaborationist union bureaucracy, supporting the struggle of the Afro-American people and other oppressed nationalities, solidarity with national liberation movements and anti-imperialist struggles around the world, agitation in the anti-war movement, opposing the influence on the mass movements of the liberal bourgeoisie and the Democratic Party, and the open propagation of communist and socialist ideas.

The *WA* trend saw that it had to wage a theoretical struggle alongside its work in the mass movements and at the workplaces: it sought to rescue Marxism-Leninism from the mud through which the Soviet Union and its supporters were dragging it. The *WA* was an ardent supporter of anti-revisionism; that is, it opposed the distortion or revision of Marxism by which the pro-Soviet regimes justified mass repression and the rule of a new, state-capitalist bourgeoisie. Originally the *WA* trend saw its theoretical task largely as openly spreading revolutionary views among workers and activists. Within a few years, it was to also see how much effort had to be put into developing new views as well.

The trend that rallied around the *Workers’ Advocate* was inspired by revolutionary movements around the world as well as the history of communist work in the US. It had its own ideas about what it thought revolutionary work should be, but it originally expected to embrace one of the existing trends in the world revolutionary movement; in the 1970s it took up Maoism and then Enver Hoxha-ism, including their support of Stalin. At the same time, in the latter 1970s it was the main trend in the communist movement that put forward the central role of opposing the “three worlds” theory in order to build an anti-revisionist movement. In the 1980s it gradually developed a deeper critique of world communist and Soviet history, the origin of revisionist ideas, and the nature of state-capitalist regimes; and this led to a distinctive view of Marxist-Leninist theory opposed to Maoism, Enver Hoxha-ism, Stalinist orientations, Trotskyism, and left communism.

Thus the trend around the *Workers’ Advocate* evolved over time and continually re-assessed its positions in the light of experience. It refused to stay silent about the problems in the communist movement; it opposed such practices as keeping these discussions confidential or leaving them out of mass agitation in the working class. The *Workers’ Advocate* itself came to an end in 1993 with the dissolution of the MLP, USA in 1993, but the *Communist Voice* has continued the theoretical struggle which the *Workers’ Advocate* had begun.

The Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line is part of the Marxist Internet Archive. The MIA provides a valuable service in preserving materials about the history of the communist movement and making them freely available to activists. We assess this history differently than the MIA does, but we think highly of their work.

### Where to find the *Workers’ Advocate*


### Where to find the *Workers’ Advocate Supplement*

The *Workers’ Advocate Supplement*, which appeared from 1985 to 1993, carried many theoretical documents, background materials, and discussion articles. It also carried various political affairs articles, leaflets, and comments that, for lack of space or other reasons, did not make it into *Workers’ Advocate* regular issues. It is available in PDF form at [https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/wa-supplement/index.htm](https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/wa-supplement/index.htm). It will soon be available in HTML.

### Where to find the *Chicago Workers’ Voice Theoretical Journal*

After the dissolution of the MLP in 1993, some comrades wanted to continue communist work. At first, the *Chicago Workers’ Voice Theoretical Journal*, put out by the Chicago Workers’ Voice group, was the common journal for all of us, and it carried a number of articles on the controversy over the
dissolution of the MLP, USA. But the CWV group soon disagreed with the views of most comrades outside Chicago, and broke off relations with us. This led to the publication of the Communist Voice and the founding, some months later, of the Communist Voice Organization. The last issue of the CWVTJ was in November 1998, and some time afterwards the Chicago Workers’ Voice group dissolved without notice. A complete set of the CWVTJ, 1994-98, can be found at http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/cwv-tj/index.htm.


Other sources

A useful list of articles from the WA and WAS, sorted according to category, can be found in the March 20, 1992 issue (vol. 8, #3) of the Workers’ Advocate Supplement. See https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/wa-supplement/8-3.pdf.

Additional materials from the history of the WA trend appear on the CVO website at www.communistvoice.org, but they are presently scattered under various categories.

The Detroit Workers’ Voice mailing list

This issue of the Communist Voice is composed largely of articles that first appeared on the Detroit Workers Voice email list. The DWV list originally served mainly as a way to notify interested people in the Detroit area of Detroit Workers’ Voice Discussion Group meetings, but its purpose has grown over time. Today, most of its readers are not in metro Detroit, and some are scattered around the world. It has become a way of keeping people in touch with the views and activities, not just of the DWV and the Detroit Marxist-Leninist Study Group, but of the Communist Voice Organization generally. The items sent out include not just DWV leaflets, but articles, leaflets, and comments from supporters of the CVO trend generally, including leaflets from the Seattle Communist Study Group. Moreover, the list is not just for people who agree with us, but for anyone who’s interested in seeing what our views are or in contributing to serious discussion of the issues which we deal with.

Over the last several years the DWV list has carried material on subjects such as

• what’s happening to the working class in some important industries,
• the deepening environmental crisis,
• the Syrian uprising and the significance of the Arab Spring,
• the massive miners’ strikes in South Africa and the separation of the largest union in South Africa, the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), from the ANC,
• the struggle in Ukraine,
• Obama’s health care bill,
• the financial crisis in the US,
• the crisis in Greece, and
• the difference between real socialism and the state-capitalist regimes.

These materials support mass struggles both here and around the world, such as workers’ struggles for a decent life, Black Lives Matter!, movements against dictatorships, and the environmental movement. But the CVO also pays close attention to the political and theoretical crisis in the left. The present weakness of the left around the world isn’t due simply to a lack of sufficient size: there is also a profound crisis concerning the methods and goals of the working class movement. The Stalinist model of socialism proved to be repulsive state-capitalism, and Trotskyism has proved to be no alternative to bankrupt Stalinism. So the Communist Voice Organization calls on activists who want to fight capitalism to join with us in opposing the bankrupt theories and practices of the past — from Western-style capitalism to Stalinist state capitalism, from reliance on the pro-capitalist trade union bigwigs to "left" communist sectarianism toward "impure" struggles. We need to lay the basis for the revolutionary working-class movement of the future by revitalizing the left-wing theory and practice of today. To help achieve this, it's important to be aware of the different views about the crisis of the left, and to consider what has to change in the left.

The DWV list had been, until September 2014, a very low frequency list, with items about once a month. But since then the list aims to cover more material, including excerpts from the best writing of other trends, and send out items at least weekly.

To subscribe to the DWV email list, send us a note at mail@communistvoice.org with your email address. We also welcome comments and suggested materials. Links to many recent items from the list can usually be found at http://www.communistvoice.org/New.html.